

THE BIMBI CULT IN SOUTHERN MALAWI

BY

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ABSTRACT

The Bimbi cult in Southern Malawi is a territorial cult, one among a number of other regional belief systems among the Chewa of Southern Malawi. As a religious system the Bimbi cult has a distinctive unwritten theology, elaborate liturgical observances, an organized inherited priesthood and a charismatic leader - the Bimbi - from whom the cult's name derives.

The thesis begins by examining the life and structural position of the Bimbi who is, in all aspects, the most representative and living symbol of the cult as a moral force. It then looks into the question of the call to Bimbiship and the processes of succession events which are believed to be divine acts from beginning to end. This is evidenced by the fact that succession to Bimbiship cuts across the principles of matrilineage of succession to headmanship among the Chewa. The third chapter of the thesis discusses the religious, shrine and political organizations of the cult which give it its territorial nature and enhance both the legitimacy of the Bimbi and the impact of the cult in the region.

The fourth, fifth and sixth chapters set forth to answer the questions, "what is the faith and prayer of the cult?" and "how do the followers understand God, the social and the natural orders in the universe?" To this purpose the thesis examines the rituals, prayers, symbolisms, beliefs and practices of those who adhere to the cult. The seventh chapter of the thesis probes into what is remembered of the earlier history of the cult and the role which the title holders of Bimbiship have played for the past hundred years. Finally an attempt has been made to examine the nature of the interaction between the cult on the one hand and Christianity and Islam on the other.

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Abbreviations

Approx.	approximately
CCAP	Church of Central Africa Presbyterian
DC	District Commissioner
D/o	daughter of
F	female
G.V.H.	Group village headman
KAR	King's African Rifles
M	male
N	Ngoni
O.T.	Oral Tradition
S/o	son of
S.T.A.	Sub-traditional Authority
T	Territorial
T.A.	Traditional Authority
UMCA	Universities' Mission to Central Africa
V.H.	Village headman
Y	Yao

Glossary of Chichewa and Yao terms used in this study

achimisyene (Y)	the owners
achimwene	brother
achino (Y)	this one
adzafukuka	they will rise
afiti	witches
akudwala	is sick
akulu-akulu	elders
akulu-wa-ampingo	cult elders or church elders
akumizimu	the spirits
akumulungu	those in God's world
ali	is
amachitila	does
amafukuka	they rise
amakhala	they remain, they live
amalakhula	speaks or speak (they)
amasekera	they rejoice
amatukwanizana	they insult one another
amawoneka	appears; looks like
ambuye	lord
ameneyu	this one
ang'ono	junior
ankhoswe	guardians
anthu	peoples
asilikali	soldiers
azimu	spirits
bambo	father
bele	breast
Bimbi	he who prophecies about rain
boma	administration
bongololo	worm
bwalo	courtyard; open space
bwanji	how
bwebweta	rave

cha	of
chaliji (Y)	it was like
Chauta	God
chibwana	a man who succeeds his father to headmanship
chifukwa	reason (because)
chinja	cut through
chinjika	interpose
chilala	famine
chilambo (Y)	the world, the earth
chilewe	an agricultural ritual dance performed by Bimbi
chili	is
chikuta	a house, a woman is in confinement
chikwati	marriage
chimela	malt
chipanda	calabash
chiphatso	travel document
chipongwe	mockery
chivumbulu	whirlwind
chiwindo	protective medicine for crops and other property
chiwa (Y)	death
chizungu	English
choipa	evil
chuma	wealthy
dengu	basket
dziko	the world
dzina	name
fumba	agricultural medicine which increases crop production
galu	dog
gwa	dissociation
ikakuwona	when it has seen you
imafuna	it requires
ina	another
ine	I, me
inu	you
kachisi	shrine

kapale-pale	weeding crops for the first time
kapuche	green worm
katsike	to climb down
kholo	ancestress
khomo	door
kodi	why; how
konza	make
kubviika	to soak
kubwebweta	to rave
kubwebwetera	to make pronouncements in state of spirit possession
kubwebwetera	to make someone rave
kuchela	to set up a trap
kuchosa	to remove
kudandaula	to feel sorry
kudula	to cut
kudya	to eat
kudzamveka	to invest upon
kudzichepetsa	to humble oneself
kugalagata	to roll on the ground
kugula	to buy
kugwidwa	to be caught
kukapepetsa	to say sorry
kulekana	to separate
kulowa	to enter; to assume
kulowola	to pay dowry
kukoma	goodness
kululuta	ululate
kulusula	to boil the porridge for beer making
kumanda	grave yard
kumanga	to tie; to stop
kumene	as has been said, let it be so
kumenyedwa	to be beaten
kumudzi	in the village
kunyadila	to be proud of
kunyungunya	sour

kupelekela	to introduce
kupembeza	worship
kupempha	to ask
kupepetsa	to say sorry
kupoposya (Y)	to seek admittance
kusinja	to pound
kusudzula	to divorce
kusunga	to look after, to keep
kutawa (Y)	to tie, to stop
kutsetsa	to sweep
kutentha	hotness
kuti	that, where
kutsira	to pour
kuwawa	sour
kuyendetsa	to lead
kuyenga	to refine, to extract
kuyera	to be white
kuzizila	to be cold
kuzima	to quench
kwa	from, to
kwatukwana	insult
kweleko (Y)	there
lalikuru	senior
laling'ono	junior
lekana	separate
lewa	avoid
ligongo (Y)	because
lilowe (Y)	voice, word
limodzi	one
litsiro	dirtiness
lobola	dowry
losinjila	day of fermentation
lyakutyochela (Y)	coming from
lupsya	burnt bush
machimo	sins
madzi	water
mafano	idols
mafuwa	three stones used for cooking

magazi	blood
makolo	parents
malekano	cross road
maliro	funeral
malonje	greetings
mamuna	man
mankhwala	medicine
masese	beer sediments
mapira	sorghum
masanje	food prepared by children in play
masoka (Y)	madness
matama	cassava flour
matapata	mortuary offering
mau	words
mawere	breasts
mayo	an expression of pain
mchele	salt
mbumba	sorority group
mdulo	getting ritually cut in the chest
mfumu	chief
mgwireni	hold him
milandu	court cases
milawe	possession seance
miono	fish traps
misala	madness
misozi	tears
mkazi	woman
mlamba	mud fish
mlandu	court case
mlenga-lenga	the heavens
mlosi	prophet
mlusu	gruel for beer making
m'mavuto	in trouble
mmbalimu	round about
mmene	likewise
mmera	crops
mmwamba	heaven

mnthaka	in the soil
mnunkhadala	vermin
mnyumba	in the house
monga	like
mpaka	until
mpela (Y)	like
Mphambe	God, lightning
Mphezi	lightning, thunder
mpingo	church
mpoto	north
moto	fire
mowa	beer
msibweni	uncle
msolola	a kind of crop eating bird
msunje	offering
msuwani	cousin
mtambo	cloud
mtendere	peace
mtima	heart
mtondo	mortar
mu	in
muchedwetsa	delaying things
mudzi	village
Mulungu	God
mutipatse	give us
mutu	head
muyaya	for ever
mvula	rain
mwabvi	poison ordeal
mwali	young girl
mwalimu	teacher
mwambo	traditions of the elders
mwana	child
mwini	owner
ndalema	I am tired
ndi	with,
ndinagwa	I fell

ndoto	dream
ne (Y)	are
ngakomboleka (Y)	impossible
nganga	gruel on the fourth day
ng'anga	medicine man
ngati	like
ngayaye	brother
nguluwe	wild pig
njale	tree climbed by Bimbis
njazi (Y)	lightning
njerere	vermin
njiwa	dove
njoka	snake
njuchi	bees
nkhang	guinea fowl
nkhoswe	guardian
nkhlulu	vermin
nkwali	bird
nsalu	cloth
nsato	python
nsembe	offering
nsima	traditional food
nsomba	fish
ntchito	work
nyanga	sorcery
nyanja	lake
nyumba	house
pa	on, at
pansi	here on earth
pepaa	pardon
sagula	is not bought
samapita	did not enter
siikata	does not cease
siima	does not stop
siyemweyo	is he not the one?
sosa	preparing gardens for planting
sitidzayambiranso	will not do it again

takatulamule(Y)	what we will be commanded
tanenani	speak
thobwa	sweet beer
tikulongosola	sort out
tikuyenda	we walk about
tilambe	let us worship
tiye	let's go
tsamira	lean upon
tsiku	day
tsinde	trunk
uBimbi	Bimbiship
uchimo	sin
ufa	flour
ufiti	witchcraft
ufulu	freedom
ufumu	chiefship
ugwirane	let it hold together
ula (Y)	rain
umangana	will be held together
umodzi	oneness
uta	bow
uyu	this one
vuma	eastern wind
wa	of
wobwebweta	he who raves
wache	his
wakazi	female
wamalambila	they venerated
wamamlemekeza	they respected
wamisala	a mad person
wanga	mine
wansembe	priest
wanthu	peoples
waukulu	big, great
wobelekela	for child bearing
wochinga	he who protects
wochinjika	protector
wochokera	coming from
wofwambidwa	kidnapped

wogwila
 wokhwima
 wolota
 wolowa naye
 wosachita
 wotentha
 wozizila
 ya
 yekha
 yele (Y)
 yemwəyo
 yoduka
 za
 zakudya
 zima
 zimakhala
 zimalupsya
 zisong'ontho
 zobwebweta
 zombe
 zopanda
 zithunzi-thunzi

workers
 witches
 dreamer
 to succeed with
 without taking action
 hot
 cold
 of, with
 by himself
 what
 the same one
 cut to pieces
 of
 food
 quench
 they become
 first rains
 empty cobs of maize
 ravings
 locusts
 without
 idols

Introduction

In Malawi there are a number of territorial cults whose primary concern is the material and moral well-being of their populations, archetypically represented by their rain-calling functions. One of these is the Bimbi rain cult which is found among the Chewa people who live in what is known as the Upper Shire Valley in Southern Malawi within the administrative boundaries of Zomba, Machinga and Mangochi districts. These districts encompass an area of approximately 15,000 sq. Km with a population of over a million people of different ethnic groups comprising Chewa, Yao, Ngoni and Lomwe and professing different religious faiths, chief among which are Christianity and Islam.

Historically the Bimbi cult is said to have been one of the Chewa religious institutions in Malawi which the Marave-state builders in the Upper Shire Valley used to hold their state system together. In its present form the Bimbi cult, as a living faith, claims a large informal following cutting across geographical, ethnic, family and faith boundaries. This is evidenced by the considerable number of people who participate in its major agricultural rituals and the popularity it enjoys today among the people both young and old.

The Bimbi cult is a good illustration of the grip which traditional religious beliefs and practices still have on the inhabitants of the Malawian countryside. Focusing on the Bimbi and his shrine in the Upper Shire Valley, this thesis has been conceived as a contribution to our understanding of the way in which religious beliefs exercise great power on a people living under an agricultural subsistence economy left to the mercy of ecological forces and the way in which these, in turn, shape their understanding of God, of themselves and of the world around them and the

relationship existing in this triad.

Within the context of the Malawian political and religious history a great deal is already known about the Msinja and Khulubvi rain shrines in Central and Southern Malawi respectively mainly as a result of the researches and writings of the late W.H.J. Rangeley and J.M. Schoffeleers. The same cannot be said about the Bimbi cult which, to the best of my knowledge, has received no attention whatsoever from Malawian historiographers, social anthropologists and theologians. It is this, among other things, which has induced me to write a description of how the cult functions today.

CHAPTER 1

THE BIMBI: A PERSONAL PORTRAIT

One of the most fundamental aspects of the Bimbi cult and the most visible and popular of all is the man or woman who assumes the title Bimbi. At a glance the incumbent seems to dominate the system and yet at a far deeper level it is the system which dominates the incumbent for, as we shall see later, there are times when the system functions unobstructed despite the absence of the title holder.

a The Bimbi's titles

The name Bimbi is of great importance and significance in the Bimbi system. It points out the functional aspects of this personage who has several roles to play within his lineage, tribe and the wider society. Before analysing further the meaning of the title Bimbi, one important aspect of the system in regard to title holders, must be explained here. The incumbent can be either a man or a woman. The system works on an alternate basis. When the incumbent is a man he is called Mchinjika. After his death he is succeeded by a woman who assumes the title Mtsamila. This is an on going process, as if it were a general law governing the rules of succession to Bimbiship.

It should be admitted, however, that in the absence of written sources it is difficult to establish whether this is a new development in the history of the cult. Oral accounts seem to indicate that there have been no time in the history of Bimbiship when this rule was bypassed and it has become common knowledge that a male Bimbi must, by the rules of succession to Bimbiship, be succeeded by a female Bimbi. The converse is the case when the presiding female Bimbi dies.

It is important to note that male and female

Bimbis are said to have equal social and political status. They both enjoy equal social and political recognition among the people they serve. Male Bimbis have no advantage over female Bimbis by virtue of their being male. There are even instances when female Bimbis are said to have been the dominant figure in the family affairs other than the husband who, among the Chewa, is considered as the "head of the family". Grace Mary Useni, for instance, has indicated that during the time of Mtsamila II, one of the female Bimbis, it was the husband in her family who used to carry out much of the domestic work.¹

This is an unusual departure from the traditional structure of Chewa social system. Among the Chewa, men occupy a very important position in the social structure. The Chewa world is a man's world. Women quite often are second class citizens bound by tradition to obey their husbands. They are supposed to carry out most of the agricultural activities and ordering the household domestic affairs over and above the all important job of looking after the young ones. It is within this frame of reference that female Bimbis emerge as a force to reckon with within a society which would demand them to assume a lowly social position. In this the Bimbiship is rather unique.

So much about the position of female Bimbis. It is essential now that we examine the meaning of the words Bimbi, Mchinjika and Mtsamila.

During my field work my informants insistently asserted that Bimbi is a Chewa word. Its etymology, however, is not known and to make matters worse, the word does not appear in David Scott's celebrated Dictionary of the Mang'anja Language (1892). George Shepperson has speculated that the fact that the word does not appear in Scott's dictionary seems to suggest that the Bimbi cult was either non-existent at the time and that it is a new invention or that it was a kind of secret society which was only known to its members.²

This speculation, however, contradicts much of the oral and written evidence at my disposal which clearly indicates that the Bimbi cult was already in existence at that time and that its influence was far reaching, encompassing not only the Chewa people among whom the cult originated but also the Yao as well.³

The word Bimbi appears in G.M. Sanderson's Dictionary of the Yao Language (1954) in which he defines it as a 'seer' or 'diviner' especially in regard to rain.⁴ This, of course, is not surprising. Michael Mann, for example, has indicated that it is fairly common in religion to use old fashioned words which are lost in the ordinary usage of a particular group of people and yet be retained in another group of people in their day-to-day usage.⁵ This, partly, explains why the name Bimbi is found in the Yao dictionary and not in the Chewa dictionary as has been indicated above.

According to Swaleyi Mkwanda, the present incumbent, the name Bimbi, means wobwebweta za mvula (he who prophecies about rain) and wolota za mvula (he who dreams about rain).⁶ Of special interest here is the meaning of the word bwebweta. David Scott has translated it as "to babble", "to rave", "to utter words under believed inspiration" as well as "to be delirious".⁷ Those who are capable of undergoing this supernatural experience are said to be able to talk well in advance about war, rain, or wild game.⁸ In this form of speech the utterances about such things as war, rain and the like are not coherent. They are uttered as one in delirium.

It is important to note that among the Chewa it is believed that the state of ku-bwebweta is achieved under the inspiration of the spirits of the departed who come upon someone from the spirit world and possess him and cause him to utter oracles.⁹ The person so possessed is said to be caught up by the spirits (kugwidwa ndi azimu) and their action on him when he

utters oracles is called kubwebwetesa (to make someone rave) and the prophecy he utters in the state of dissociation (gwa) is known as kubwebwetera (to make pronouncements on something which is about to happen).

It is common belief among the Chewa that when any person is thus seized by the spirits he utters words which do not concern himself but are for warning.¹⁰ Quite often, as we shall see later, such warning is directed to the senior members of the family or heads of villages and chiefs calling upon them to examine their social, political and religious conduct and redress the wrongs committed. Any man or woman may feel himself or herself possessed. Utterances made in that state of mind are regarded with reverence. They are incoherent but there are some skilled persons who interpret them to the people.

Mkanda Maganga, another of my informants, in line with Swaleyi Mkwanda's second definition of the word Bimbi has it that Bimbi is "a man who dreams (kulota) about rain and drought. He is not a god. He is just a dreamer. When he dreams about what God says to him he tells the people about it and people do what he tells them to do in order to avoid drought and save their lives".¹¹ According to Alexander Manjaule the name Bimbi means "he who tells about hidden events. Bimbi is a man or woman whom when you ask him or her about hidden events does not consult an oracle or use any medicine but tells what he or she sees in visions. This is how he or she predicts the future. When Bimbi sees visions and hears words from the supernatural he communicates these to the people concerned in the community".¹² Another insight of what the name Bimbi means is that given by Hinda-Hinda. According to him the name Bimbi means "one who tells about rain and encloses himself in a dark house. He eats very little so that when we see him wonder whether he eats nsima (traditional food). He is always concerned about rain".¹³

As we shall see later it is customary that when Bimbi wants to make public pronouncements about rain he is normally enclosed in a dark house. His concern about rain is so great that he inflicts upon himself severe bodily mortifications and consequently grows thin. Hinda-Hinda's interpretation which stems from the Bimbi's physical appearance, seems to be in line with Swaleyi Mkwanda's testimony of how the Bimbis look like. "We the Bimbis", says Mkwanda, "are never fat, we are always thin. My grandfather Timang'amba Bimbi was very thin. My aunt Akumbirika Mtsamila II was thin too. We may look well at the time we assume the name Bimbi but afterwards we grow less in weight."¹⁴

A Bimbi is thus, a man or woman who every now and then comes under a believed inspiration of the spirits of the departed who make such a person talk about rain. He is a public figure, a kind of a spokesman of the spirits in this world in their interaction with the living in their social setting. It must be borne in mind that not everyone who "babbles" is Bimbi. The Bimbi's primary duty is to speak to the people about rain, to help people pray for it and by means of prayer avoid or eliminate personal and impersonal spiritual forces such as witchcraft, lightning, the anger of the ancestral spirits and others, which may be dangerous to the life of the people and their crops.

Having analysed the meaning of the word Bimbi it is important to briefly examine the meaning of the word Mchinjika. According to Swaleyi Mkwanda, the name Mchinjika means "wochinjika dziko; wochinga wanthu" (He who protects the earth, he who protects the people) and is used primarily for male Bimbi.¹⁵ Mkwanda was unable to explain why the name is used to male Bimbis only and not to women Bimbis. The name Mchinjika comes from the root word chinjika which is translated by Scott as "to protect", "to shelter", "to interpose" the leading idea being of a thing which is put in

between for a guard in order to ward off any danger that may befall on it.¹⁶ Scott points further that chinjika comes from chinja meaning "to hit and rebound" without entering a protected area as when wild animals meet a fence surrounding a garden and skirt along side of it for failing to go through it.¹⁷

Thus the name Mchinjika is highly significant. It conveys the notion of a saviour for Mchinjika is one who saves the life of the people by protecting them from the dangers which may hit them and the land to destroy them mainly in terms of drought and famine. This salvation is afforded by means of prayer of Bimbi ~~to~~ Chauta and the ancestral spirits as well as by warning people to be on their guard and abandon evil which may have disastrous consequences upon their lives. This generates faith among the people in him.

The last name to consider in this analysis is that of Mtsamila. It comes from the root verb 'tsamira' which, according to Scott, means 'lean upon' or 'lean against' to avoid the danger of falling off.¹⁸ According to Swaleyi Mkwanda, the name Mtsamila means "wotsamila dziko lonse" (one on whom the whole world leans upon) and it is particularly given to female Bimbis.¹⁹ Another informant has it that the name Mtsamila means "wotsamila dzina la a bambo wake" (one who inherits her father's name).²⁰ This interpretation is given to Mtsamila possibly because one of the female Bimbis, Mtsamila II succeeded her father. While the first interpretation conveys soteriological meaning the second is based more in terms of succession arrangements for as we shall see later succession to Bimbiship does not follow the Chewa system of succession based on the principle of matrilineage. Another meaning of the name Mtsamila and perhaps the most interesting of all is that given by CheKwenda. According to him the name Mtsamila means "wotsamila matumba a mvula"²¹ (she who controls the bags of rain). Here the rain is viewed in terms of being stored in

bags and under the control of no lesser figure than Mtsamila. Since Mtsamila is the controlling agent of rain on behalf of the ancestral spirits and without whom there would be an uneven and chaotic fall of rain, the title holder is held in great esteem and veneration.

The Bimbis have, in most accounts, been enigmatic figures. Even during their life time they seem to live already in the past and yet being aware that they are here and now. The complexity of their life style makes the Bimbis legendary figures which the incumbents themselves begin to believe in and order their lives accordingly.

b Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi: A Biography

Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi was born in 1919 at Mvera-wa-Nyemvu on the shores of lake Malombé twelve miles north east of Kalembo township.²² According to the genealogy given below²³ his mother was Ulaya and his father Mkwanda. They were cousins. Swaleyi was born in a family of eight children four of whom were boys and four were girls. These were che Gelemu (M) che Isa (M), che Mchinjika (M),²⁴ che Swaleyi (M) che Sifawa (F), ku-Laisi (F), che Upasyeje (F) and che Pitcha (F). Swaleyi himself was the last born. Swaleyi has it that they lived at Mvera-wa-Nyemvu along the shores of Lake Malombe for a long time farming. There were his father, his mother, his uncle, himself and his brothers and sisters. In 1933 they left Mvera-wa-Nyemvu to Mponda-wa-Bimbi village on the western shores of the Shire River ten miles north east of Kalembo.²⁵ Thus Swaleyi was brought up close to the land and agriculture formed the basis of his livelihood.

He never went to school for formal education but he knows how to read and write though in a rudimentary form. He did not attend a Koranic school. His father, however, was a muslim and of his own initiative he

taught Swaleyi the principles of Islam and eventually Swaleyi became a muslim.

Later Swaleyi assumed minor responsibilities at the local mosque. Because of his social stand as a devoted muslim leader he became popularly known as Che Mwalimu (teacher). Sometimes even the title Sheikh has wrongly been applied to him as being what he was before he became Bimbi. Swaleyi's own testimony states:

"I was not a full mwalimu [teacher] because I could not read that Allah did this or said that. I could not preach. I never preached in a mosque at all. I never stood before a congregation in a mosque and preach; nothing of that sort happened. But as a muslim I knew how to say my prayers and also as a muslim I observed Ramadhan".²⁶

Swaleyi's lack of formal education is not surprising. Many children of his age and time were more often than not denied such golden opportunities. Yet his village was one of the few lucky ones in the area. Great attempts were made by the UMCA missionaries to set up a mission station and a school in the Old Bimbi village. Swaleyi himself has it that the first UMCA school in the area was set up at Mponda-wa-Bimbi and thereafter at Manga, Litete, Kalako and Namalomba.²⁷ Archdeacon Christopher B. Eyre in his account of his trip down to the Shire in 1908 with Padre Jenkin has the following documented:

"[Mbtembwe] - chief Mbimbi - the first school we reached after leaving Mpondas, is just below Mvera on the right bank of the Shire River, a few miles below Lake Pamalombe. A teacher was put here in March 1905 ..."²⁸

And another UMCA missionary writing sometime in 1921 states:

"Mbimbi has suddenly grown from ten to thirty boys and eighteen girls. Work started here years ago when steamers still ran to the lake from Liwonde and it was a flourishing mission village ... All the children now come and they have also started coming from neighbouring villages and the school is now the largest in the district."²⁹

But despite much effort by the UMCA missionaries to introduce formal education in the area where Swaleyi was brought up, as a child he was never sent to school. This was because the response from the people was rather negative. A number of factors seem to have been contributory to this. First and foremost and as far as the Old Bimbi village was concerned in 1910, five years after the UMCA established their mission and school, Islam folk got in³⁰ and claimed a number of converts. Swaleyi's own father was converted to Islam. Thus formal education in the Old Bimbi village was checked.

It appears that once the village folk in the Old Bimbi village adopted Islam they became suspicious of the intentions of the mission schools. Many muslim parents were somewhat reluctant to send their children to school for fear that their children would be converted to Christianity since the schools in existence had been pioneered and financed by missionaries anyway. It seemed to them that the school was a kind of 'conversion trap' and to be avoided.

Sheikh Useni Twaibu Mwalabu has pointed out that the reluctance of muslim parents to send their children to school was instigated by the Arabs, for the Whites and the Arabs had become enemies because of slave trade which the Arabs practised. The Arabs instructed their followers that they should not participate in the education designed by the Whites especially White missionaries for fear that their faith would be perverted by them.³¹ The muslim's fear was justified for the UMCA's objective in school

building is unambiguously stated by Rev. C. Carleton.
He writes:

"Up to now the medium for teaching religion has been the school. If the school fails through lack of interest, the preaching of the gospel fails, or if there are children sufficiently keen on school they seldom reach the stage of being hearers because of the opposition of their relations".³²

And the disappointed Fr. H.E. Mumby has reiterated:

"And some of them want to read in school by learning to write only, and they say, we only want to know writing in letters then we shall go to the European and we shall get work quickly for we know how to write any European can read; they want to be in stores, to get profit for themselves but to become christians they cannot".³⁴

It is obvious from the discussion above that forces greater than sheer will power were at work during Swaleyi's childhood to prevent him from pursuing the opportunities of formal education. Swaleyi's progressive mind enables him to look back into the distant past and reflect on the prospects awaiting the new generation. "When I see that things have changed for the better" says Swaleyi, "I say to myself 'if I were still a young man I would have gone to school so that I also would have been able to speak chizungu (English)".³⁴ Swaleyi does not speak or read English. He speaks Chichewa and ChiYao and is able to write them both.

Swaleyi is married. He is a polygamist. Up to three years ago he had three wives all of them Muslims but presently he remains with two. His first wife Tugambeabiti Lifa came from Chikolongwe village but she was divorced in 1982 for reasons which were not explained to me. Swaleyi married her in 1938.

She bore him the following daughters: abiti Isa, abiti Gelemu, abiti Sinoya and abiti Jemusi. In 1951 Swaleyi took another wife. Her name was aMbilaga abiti Mndala. She came from Kalimila village. She bore him the following daughters: abiti Ali, abiti Suwedi, abiti Swaleyi and abiti Mtila. Swaleyi's third wife is Alusi abiti Imani. She comes from Bimbi village. She has four children; two sons and two daughters.³⁵

Ritually, it is Bimbi's third wife Alusi abiti Imani who is of great importance here. Swaleyi traces abiti Imani's genealogy back to Timang'amba Bimbi. According to him one of Timang'amba's wives was Kabechele. Timang'amba had ten wives altogether. Kabechele bore a daughter. Her name was aMisa. She in turn bore a daughter whom she named aKusaliya. It was aKusaliya who bore abiti Imani's mother. Her name was abiti Yabu. Swaleyi claims that abiti Yabu was his aunt and that abiti Imani is his cousin. She was given to him in marriage by the elders when Swaleyi was installed as Bimbi in 1959.³⁶

As mkazi wolowa naye dzina (the wife you assume the name with) abiti Imani is a key figure in the life of the Bimbi. She was told by the elders at the time of her marriage:

"You have entered the name with your husband. You should not take off your clothes by the river side for a bath. You are mfumu's wife (chief's wife). You must bath always at home in your bathroom. If you are found misbehaving on the road you will be a laughing stock. People will not respect you and your husband as well".³⁷

This charge seems to have been intended to preserve the social stand of Bimbi as a village headman through his wife who together with him is a public figure. Apparently this injunction is made to all village headmen and chiefs' wives among the Chewa. But abiti Imani's

position is more than that of a village headman's wife. For according to Nandumbo Kasira when she was given in marriage by the elders to Swaleyi Mkwanda a round house - kachisi (shrine) was built for milawe in the Bimbi village and abiti Imani was put in charge of that house to look after Bimbi.³⁸ These days the house has four corners but has a round roof. No milawe can take place in the village except in this rounded roof house. During milawe abiti Imani abandons the house leaving Bimbi alone inside.

A few things need to be explained here. To start with the house itself with the round roof is highly symbolic. Ad de Vries has pointed out that a house is a symbol of the human body especially the female maternal body³⁹ with the door representing the female reproductive organ. As will be shown later, during milawe,⁴⁰ which takes place at this Kachisi, the passage way leading to the door must be left unobstructed for that is the passage through which the spirits who are in control of the rain can get into the shrine.⁴¹ The roof seems to be reminiscent of the sky or the heavens considered as masculine and spiritually wedded to female earth in a sacred marriage.⁴²

Abiti Imani herself as a ritual personage is shrouded in symbols. She is a remnant of a spirit wife system which is the hallmark of the Bimbi religious system which is concerned with the fecundity of the earth and the assurance of an even supply of rain for the crops, thus sustaining the life of the people on the land. Swaleyi Mkwanda has pointed out that the spirit wife system is crucial to the whole Bimbi system, without which the latter could not operate; it would be unthinkable. If a Bimbi were not provided with a spirit wife, rain could not come whenever he prayed for it. There could be a very severe famine.⁴³ In its present form the system is less marked and simplified. According to Swaleyi, in the past the spirit wife lived in a shrine in the sacred forest of Mponda-wa-Bimbi and

not in the village as it is the case now.

The custom of keeping a spirit wife in the shrine in the forest ended when the Whites came. "The practice", says Swaleyi, "continued for three years after the declaration of a Protectorate over Nyasaland (Malawi). The Whites insisted that it should be ended. We argued that we did not put the women in the shrine so that they should die there. We had in fact supplied them with the necessary foodstuffs as required and other items such as mats, clothing and gave them company. But the Whites insisted that the custom be ended because it was inhuman. We agreed to what they said and since then the practice of putting women in the shrine was stopped".⁴⁴

Having discussed the position of abiti Imani it is time we turned to consider the other aspects of Swaleyi's life. At the age of twenty five Swaleyi left Mponda-wa-Bimbi and went to Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) to work in the mines there. Before going to Zimbabwe he used to grow maize which he sold at the local market. Sometimes he used to set fish traps (kuchela miono) in the waters of the Shire River but nothing good used to come out of it. Swaleyi's journey to the mines in Zimbabwe was undertaken primarily for economic reasons. Frustrated by the home economic situation he sought permission from the boma (government). This was called kudula chiphatso (to buy a free passage). He went to Zimbabwe in 1944 to work in a mine in M.P. Kwekwe. He was doing a labourer's job for which he was paid £1.25 per month!⁴⁵

Swaleyi's stay in Kwekwe was not uneventful for he found himself in a situation which nearly killed him, as the following personal testimony of his experiences there bears witness. He recounted to me:

"I was in the mine one day working when I suddenly hurt my finger very badly. You can see this finger is different from this one. When I had that accident

I told the Boss boy that I had hurt myself. So he told me to go outside the mine to have the finger bandaged with some medicine.

I left my working area through another tunnel. I had a candle in my hand. I found a junction, one tunnel going this way and another tunnel, going that way. There the wind blew off my candle. I was completely stranded in darkness not knowing what to do next. I knew I was surrounded by water and could fall into it anytime if I made a wrong movement. I did not know what to do at all. I suffered greatly and feared I might die anytime.

I stayed in the mine for many hours. My colleagues left the mine in the afternoon. I was hurt at 7.00am but stayed in the mine for the whole of that day and the whole of the following day. I managed to get through the danger of falling into the water by throwing stones on the sides of the tunnels to find out where there was dry ground. This I did by judging the sound of the stones as they fell on the sides on the ground. I was thus able to distinguish between where there was water and where there was dry ground.

After long hours of crawling on the ground I discovered some people walking in the tunnel with their torches. I followed them. After some distance I saw lights everywhere. I sighed; I now realised I was safe. Some guards found me and asked me where I had been. I told them that I had been involved in an accident and that I needed to get out of the mine. They all thought that I was very lucky that I was still alive.

They lifted me up and told me not to go in the mine again but to do a number of jobs outside the mine altogether. When my contract ended I came back to Nyasaland [Malawi], as we used to call it. I came back naturally, as anyone else".⁴⁶

After four years of working experience in Zimbabwe, Swaleyi returned home in 1948. Once he had settled down, he started farming again. He grew rice, maize and finger millet and sold all these at the local market.

After independence the new government policies put more emphasis on farming with the slogan chuma chili mnthaka (wealth is on the land). Swaleyi responded positively to the new agricultural policies. So he began to work even harder in the gardens until he was able to buy a few items for himself, and his families and was able to build a good house for himself.

Later on Swaleyi realised that he could make good money by growing cotton. He describes his fortune in the following words:

"I have been growing cotton for the past twenty four years. I have been working very hard. I carry the pump for spraying the cotton on my back ...

I have been farming all along until I managed to build my own house. I have been able to make money out of cotton. Out of this hard work I have been able to buy a plough and two bulls to push it.

When the rainy season is good I make a substantial sum of money. Say in one year I made fifty bags of cotton. I earned K340-00 [£170-00]. I spent this money on iron sheets for my house. I also collected three hundred baskets of maize in a nine acres garden, there were three granaries. I took all the maize from two of these put it into bags and went to sell the maize at Ntchalo. I made K180-00 [£90-00]. With this money in my pocket I asked people to make some bricks for me for my house.

The following year I grew more cotton and then I was able to buy doors, windows and many other things for the house. I grew cotton again the third time running, this time I used the money to pay the builders of my house.

I worked three consecutive years in the garden in order to build my house. This is a result of hard work in the garden bearing the spraying pump on my back. For the past twelve years I have been spraying cotton. It is only when I do not feel well in my body that I sometimes hire some people to help me spraying the cotton. Otherwise I work there myself with my family. A short time ago I had some hired labour who were spraying my cotton. I hire people just for that sort of work since my body is now tired

because of working hard in the gardens and I need some rest. I do not have full time workers but only hired labour whenever I need it. By and large it is me and my wife who labour all day long in the gardens working as hard as we can. We only hire people for a job we cannot do ourselves".⁴⁷

According to Swaleyi each one of his families has a garden for themselves to grow food for their children and grand-children. He grows cotton however, to enable him then to buy cloth and some luxuries.

That Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi is a progressive hard working farmer is testified by many people in the Ulongwe area. Nandumbo Kasira testifies that Swaleyi is a big farmer who makes a lot of money out of cotton, maize and msanje which he sells at Admarc. This being the case, Nandumbo concludes, Swaleyi does not ask for any fee when people come to consult him on matters of rain except a few pennies which they collect and give him as a thanks offering".⁴⁸

Although Swaleyi's farming activities have been hitherto considered as an economic success story, there seems to be a religious dimension behind it. Apart from setting an example as a good farmer, Bimbi may as well want to demonstrate that farming is a religious activity for, as J.E. Cirlot has indicated, farming as a basic occupation, has a very special spiritual significance in that its activities take place not only in the sacred world of seeds, buds, and flowers and fruit but also follows the cosmic order as illustrated by the calendar. In a sense it is symbolic of death and resurrection as seen in the going out of the 'old year' and the coming in of the 'new year'. More particularly this is seen in the death and coming to life of the seed which may be analogous to human life. "One of the main roots of soteriological optimism", Cirlot writes, "was the belief, of prehistoric, agricultural mysteries that the dead like seeds underground

can expect to return to life in a different form".⁴⁹ That this agricultural religious idea is the hallmark of the Bimbi's teaching is seen in his sermons during milawe. Bimbi sees the agricultural cycle as patterned in the form of death and resurrection from the dead not only of the seeds which die and come back to life again but of people as well.⁵⁰

Swaleyi Mkwanda claims that when he was a child he never knew that one day he would become Bimbi and have the functions he has now. As regards his training to Bimbiship there is a dead silence. My informants unanimously asserted that Bimbis never have formal training. That he must have had some experience of the work of a Bimbi is obvious from his own testimonies. He asserts that he saw his grandfather Timang'amba Bimbi but was not able to recognize him all that much. He used to carry him in his hands and put him on his lap and play with him. Timang'amba died before Swaleyi became of age. However, whatever informal training to Bimbiship Swaleyi acquired must have come from Mtsamila II. This is deduced from Swaleyi's account of his relationship with her, which gives us a glimpse of continuity. He says:

"I saw Mtsamila myself. I lived with her for a long time. She was my father's sister.

Mtsamila, my aunt was Timang'amba Bimbi's daughter. She used to cook nsima (traditional food) for me".⁵¹

It seems plausible to argue from what has been said above that those who succeed others to Bimbiship appear to acquire some of their skills in rain-calling through their informal contacts with their predecessors during their life situations. The Bimbis themselves, however, see their call and role in society as part of a divine plan. One of my informants, Che Mbungo, stated that the present Bimbi, quite often, describes his call and role in these words:

"What I am doing is what the spirits tell me to do because I was consecrated by them. My call came from Ghauta (God) in order to do this work but is passed to me through the spirits of my ancestors. Whoever despises my word despises Mulungu (God) because what I say is the word of Mulungu coming to me through the spirits of my fathers. My work to you (the people) is to tell you what God's state of mind is. When he is angry or displeased with your conduct, the spirits are sent by Mulungu to tell me about this and they ask me to tell you about this and what you should do in order to redress the situation".⁵²

The bulk of my oral evidence seems to indicate that Bimbi's belief that he is called by Mulungu is very strong although the call, it appears, does not come directly from Mulungu but indirectly through the ancestral spirits. It is interesting to note that J. Lindblom has pointed out that this way of feeling about one's call to a religious mission is typical of a prophetic figure. Lindblom has it that a prophet knows that he has never chosen his way himself but that he has been chosen by the deity. He points to a particular experience in his life through which it has become clearer to him that the deity has a special mission for him. According to Lindblom, a prophetic call has a supernatural character, exceeds all human reason and takes the individual by surprise. It is always regarded as an act of divine grace.⁵³

Because of the nature of his call and work Bimbi has sometimes been called mau wochokela kwa Chauta (the word from God) or in its Yao equivalent, he is lilowe lyakutyochela kwa Mlungu. The Bimbi is thus the voice (lilowe) from God. Bimbi has often told people that what he tells them is not something he makes up himself but what he hears and receives from Chauta and ancestral spirits. He claims to talk under the inspiration of Chauta. He says "I am not god, I am not an ancestral spirit. I am merely a voice (mau)

speaking to my fellow men. I am a voice to point out what people have done wrong in their villages and families and why they are being punished by lack of rain". Bimbi says that he is a voice to warn people of impending dangers such as drought, disease etc., and how to remedy the situation. As a voice (mau) Bimbi does not believe that he is a superman but that he has been called by Chauta in his secret ways to be Bimbi and speak out against the sins of the people. Bimbi believes that when he tells people the wishes of Chauta he is spirit (mzimu) himself at that particular point in time, but in a physical form.⁵⁴

If people's assessment of Bimbi's role in society as a voice from God is correct, then it can be argued that Bimbi is a real prophetic figure indeed although no where near the prophets in the Old Testament as we know them. Bimbi speaks forth what he believes to be the word from Mulungu and in the spirit of true prophecy he does not hesitate to pronounce divine judgement upon the people in times of moral, social and political crisis. One of my informants has this to say about Bimbi's prophetic role:

"People respect Bimbi not because of what he is as a person, but because of what he tells us about our sins. He tells us why Mulungu is angry with us and how we can repair our broken relationship with him. Bimbi is respected for what he says by pointing to the people the nature of their sins and the impending dangers as a consequence of their sins. He is the voice of Mulungu to us.... We do not attribute to Bimbi the gifts we receive after consulting him. We attribute them to Chauta. Bimbi is like a spirit and he is possessed by spirits. His spirits know the things which we do which make Mulungu angry and which make him act against us when there is no rain.

... When we consult Bimbi we do not give him godly powers because he is a mere human being. He is not mulungu (god). He eats and engages himself in farming. All he does as mzimu (spirit) is to tell us where we have gone wrong leaving Mulungu's ways.⁵⁵

Lindblom has postulated that what distinguishes a prophet from other religious people whose life is devoted in communion with God, prayer and moral submission to the divine will, is that he always feels compelled to announce to others what he has seen and heard from God. The prophet is a man of public word. He is inspired by a mighty power to speak and preach. All in all the prophet is a proclaimer of divine revelation and he himself knows that his thoughts and words never come from himself but those of the divine power which speaks through him.⁵⁶

According to Kudawe Chiwere, Bimbi is able to claim to share in a particular divine inspiration because he has a kind of telegraphic system implanted in his head. When the mizimu (spirits) are in their heavenly council discussing the nature of rain of a particular year the Bimbi is immediately informed through this telegraphic system. He enters in the heavenly council of the ancestral spirits who are in charge of rain and participates, in a psychic form, in their deliberations. Through this participation he receives messages from them as if it were Chauta himself.⁵⁷

It is important to note that it is popularly believed that sometimes Bimbi is punished by the ancestral spirits on behalf of the sins of the people. Che Mbungo put it aptly this way:

"Sometimes Bimbi is 'beaten' (kumenyedwa) in the milawe house by the spirits because of our sins. You can hear him say: mayo, mayo, mayo, tanenani, tanenani, tanenani (how painful, speak!) And then he mentions the names of people in the audience and tells them the wrongs they have done against Mulungu and what they should do in order to put them right".⁵⁸

Here we nearly come to the notion of vicarious suffering so common in prophetic life. From what Bimbi does, experiences and says it seems appropriate to consider him a prophet, that is, as one who conveys a divine

utterance and thus serves as a mouth piece of Chauta. This assertion is based on the fact that many elements of prophetism are encapsulated in the Bimbi personage as we have seen in the discussion which has gone before. The Bimbi as a prophetic type appears to have "the consciousness of having access to information from the world above and experiences originating in the divine world from which ordinary men are excluded. They all speak of a particular contact with the supernatural world by which they have been subjected to influences from that world not vouchsafed to other men".⁵⁹

A quick glance at the Bimbi's social life would tempt one to conclude that he is a thychopath but that would lead to a wrong interpretation of this all important figure. During the rainy season amaoneka ngati wamisala (we see him as if he were a mad person) and throughout the years the Bimbi's life seems to be patterned in the Bimbi code or rule of life. It is dominated by abnormal patterns of social behaviour. What is important to bear in mind is that Bimbi's life is dominated and directed by the ancestral spirits of whom he is said to be the incarnate representative on earth. So in a sense and at a far deeper level the Bimbi leads a dual life, the life of the dead and of the living at one and the same time. He is capable of living a normal human life and yet of transcending it to a level which ordinary men and women have not been able to achieve.

One of the most spectacular aspects of the life of the Bimbi is his constant communion with the spiritual world, Chauta's world, through the mediumship of his ancestral spirits who make him see visions and dream dreams. I have seen him quite often breaking off a conversation during which he is believed to enter into the council of the spirits from whom he is said to receive special messages for the governance of the people's lives. This claim of Bimbi and his officials seems to be beyond dispute for the simple

reason that his psychical experiences, as it will be shown later, give him a sense of authority and immense power over men including chiefs who may claim seniority over him in political matters.

Bimbi is a village headman. The name Bimbi as a village headman appears in the Upper Shire District Book in 1910 under the subdivision of the Liwonde subdistrict Act Tax. The total huts by then were six⁶⁰ possibly with an average population of sixty people (my own calculation). The Bimbis have, for approximately the past 125 years, been surrounded by very powerful Yao chiefs. To the east there are the powerful chiefdoms of Liwonde and Kawinga. To the immediate east and within there is the chieftaincy of Kalembo. To the north east there is chief Mponda and to the south chief Msamala and others. Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi reckons that now his village comprises more than two hundred people. But compared with the chiefs the Bimbi, as a village headman, is an insignificant political power and is no match to them all and yet the Bimbi's influence encompasses much of the districts in which the above named traditional authorities hold sway. Although Bimbi's legitimacy to political headship is openly challenged by the principal secular authorities in the region, his position as a spiritual leader has withstood the test of time.

Village headman Bimbi sees his headmanship as unique and God given. He puts it in this way:

"The village headmanship of Bimbi was here long before the village headmanship of the book [based on hut tax] began. The headmanship of the book began with the whites. The headmanship of Bimbi started at the choice of the spirits. This is the difference between my headmanship [ufumu wanga] and theirs."⁶¹

Another important aspect of the Bimbi's life is his devotion to the work of the ancestral spirits whom he sees as mediums between the High God on the one hand

and the living people on the other. He sees his relationship with the ancestral spirits as a kind of ukwati (marriage) to which he must remain faithful and stand unreservedly at their disposal. Because of this marriage relationship between Bimbi and the ancestral spirits, Bimbi claims that he refrains from sexual intercourse during the whole rainy season which in the case of Malawi begins at the end of October or early November and ends in March or early April.⁶² This severe sexual continence is believed by Bimbi as part of his call to Bimbishop. He, as a representative man, must be strong of heart (wolimba mtima) in matters where other people are weak. During my interviews I noted that this strong will on the part of Bimbi to refrain from sexual intercourse inspires other people to follow his example.

It appears that the Chewa, are a people who have great respect for individual and communal moral purity. This is mainly expressed in the injunction against sexual intercourse immediately before any form of offering is made to the deity. This injunction may involve, one individual, a small group of people, or a big group of individuals within the lineage or ethnic group depending on the scale of the rituals in action. Times when the sex taboo is imposed among the people include offerings for rain, when an epidemic has taken place or a child is sick in the home and immediately after a burial has taken place.

The Bimbi is thus an ideal example of a man who values moral purity at its best. But far and above this the Bimbi's avoidance of sex during the rainy season has greater symbolic significance. This can be expressed in terms of the dual concept of 'hotness' and 'coolness'. The Chewa believe that sexual intercourse and more particularly adultery produces 'heat' kutentha. According to M.G. Marwick, the 'hotness' comes from men for it is their 'hotness' that makes them desire coitus.⁶³ Swaleyi Mkwanda has observed that the dual concept of

'hotness' and 'coolness' is a distinctive characteristic of Chewa morality. It is a taboo which governs the relationship between the healthy and the sick, the old and the young to ensure that the moral evils of those who are in the state of hotness do not affect those who are morally pure in their hearts for hotness is contagious.⁶⁴

For example among the Chewa a man should refrain from committing adultery when his wife is pregnant because she and her unborn child are ritually 'cold' (wozizila) and his adultery would make him hot (wotentha); consequently he would kill the child with mdulo (to cut the child) as soon as he goes to the doorway of her hut.⁶⁵

In abnormal circumstances, if a child is very sick in the family the parents are required by tradition to refrain from sexual intercourse, because their hotness would aggravate the sickness of the child and eventually die. A sick child is said to be in a state of 'coolness' and it is this coolness in contact with the parents' 'hotness' which kills the child. This taboo is also observed when boys and girls undergo initiation ceremonies.

The sex taboo appears to be fairly common among African people. Mary Douglas has indicated that among the Lele people sexual activity was held to be in itself dangerous, not for the partners to it but dangerous for the weak and anyone coming fresh from sexual intercourse should be avoided lest by the direct contact their fever should increase. New born babies would be killed by such contacts.⁶⁶

The symbolic significance of the sex taboo in the religious life of the African people has been adequately explained by the Kriges. Among the Lovedu, for instance, the state of being 'hot' is said to be an abnormality and it is the antithesis of the condition of coolness which is conceived of as healthy, propitious or right.

Evil is thus explained in terms of heat which causes drought the antithesis of rain. The need for rain outweighs anything in the life of the individual and the community among the Lovedu for

"To them the ultimate good is rain. Rain is regarded as not merely the material source of life and happiness and the physical basis of man's sense of security, it is also a symbol of spiritual well being and a manifestation that the social order is operating smoothly. Hence coolness denotes a state of euphoria ... On the other hand, heat as an antithesis of the main basis of man's security, the cooling, life-giving rain, is conceived as a destructive force leading to a state of dysphoria".⁶⁷

It is interesting to note that the sex taboo on the part of Bimbi is reflected even in his farming activities for though Bimbi is a type of ideal farmer, he is not allowed to sow seeds on the ground. It is anathema. It is believed that if Bimbi sowed something on the soil it would kill the fertility of the land of which he claims to be the guardian. His action, it is believed, would lead to drought and drought to famine and famine would lead to deaths of many people in the area. It is in order to avoid this catastrophic situation that much of the sowing in the Bimbi's farm is done by his wives, children and whenever necessary by hired labour. It seems plausible to postulate that this avoidance of sowing is symbolic of avoidance of sex on the part of Bimbi. Since sex as a loss of semen constitutes a considerable loss of strength continence is the normal preparation for the extraordinary preparations during grain sowing.⁶⁸

Another interesting aspect of the Bimbi's life is that he does not attend funerals even of his closest relatives. It is taboo. When someone dies in the Bimbi village, the Bimbi avoids coming near the house where the corpse lies waiting for burial. He goes

away from the village to wherever the spirits ask him to go. I was told by my informants close to Bimbi that the Bimbi leaves the village at the first signs of someone's death. This he does, so I was told, without being instructed by someone in the village but through the believed communication which goes between him and the ancestral spirits.

When he is travelling around in the villages Bimbi avoids, through what appears to be clairvoyance, any funeral processions which may come his way. This he does by taking a different route altogether.⁶⁹

This action of avoiding death can only be understood within the general theory that in many parts of Africa chiefs and Kings are given special honour of religious nature. Their position at the apex of the social fabric gives them special status. They are considered as half-divine during their life time and fully divine after death. Here we come face to face with the idea of divine kingship. Closely linked with this idea of divine kingship is the notion that a divine chief or king must be invulnerable to physical death since by nature he is immortal even on this physical plane.

In the African context E.J. and J.D. Krige who have made an extensive study of the pattern of the Lovedu society in the north-eastern corner of Transvaal furnish us with one of the best examples of divine kingship. They maintain that the Lovedu rulers had always been sacred. They were divine. In such circumstances the divine king or queen was expected to have no physical defects or grow too old or become decrepit. The divine ruler must be immune to disease or any other form of physical weakness lest the kingdom suffers. Writing about the Lovedu queen the Kriges have this documented:

"She is the soil, her death 'heals' or 'dries up' the soil in the double sense of defiling it and scorching it and as they phrase it, the country dies with

its owner. Consequently, after the queen's death, famines come, cattle and people succumb and many flee the country".⁷⁰

Therefore, the Lovedu queen had to commit ritual suicide which, in theory, elevated her to a divinity since it was only by her own act and not because of the vulnerability of her physical nature that she died. The same can be said of the Mukama of Bunyoro.

J. Beattie has indicated that in pre-European times a person or even an ox, who was sick had to be removed from the royal enclosure in case the king's health should be affected. The king had to avoid all contact with death and if he himself fell sick the matter was kept strictly secret. Besides, if his illness were serious, he would either kill himself by taking poison or killed by one of his wives. The leading idea was that imperfection or weakness in the king would involve a corresponding danger to the kingdom.⁷¹

In the case of the Bimbis I was informed they do not die in the same ordinary manner as people do. The Bimbi does not become sick and die in the ordinary way. According to Mkanda Maganga the Bimbi is first possessed by the spirits as usual and eventually becomes weaker and weaker until he dies in a state of being possessed. This is how Mtsamila II died in Mkanda village in 1957.⁷²

There are also indications that ritual suicide is not uncommon in the history of the Bimbis. An instance close to this must have happened during the time of Bimbi Mtsamila I sometime in the 1860's. According to the official interpretations of the events of that period, the Ngoni under chief Chidyaonga attempted to kill Bimbi Mtsamila I and destroy her supernatural powers. Their plans were, however, confounded for when they reached Mtsamila's quarters, they found that she had already taken her life away.⁷³ She committed what appeared to be a ritual suicide. Although this was not explained by my informants it can be concluded by implication that it was a way to tell the Ngoni that

the Bimbis are divine and could not face death in the hands of mortal men.

The death of a Bimbi sometimes may have adverse effects. Swaleyi Mkwanda has it that when his grandfather Timang'amba Bimbi died sometime in 1927 there was a great famine in the area as a result. That the year 1927 was marked by sporadic famines in the Upper Shire region which were carried on well into 1928 is seen in the entries in Nyasaland Diocesan Chronicle of that year. Fr. Petro Kilekwa writes:

"We had our first rain in the beginning of December, all the people of the district were working very hard to fight against famine".⁷⁴

And Fr. G.H. Wilson had documented:

"The last few months have been very sad ones owing to the famine. The crops in the neighbourhood were almost a complete failure. As early as October or even September people were already seeking food elsewhere. The saddest part is that it is almost impossible to buy food in any quantity at any price".⁷⁵

Although there may be no direct link between the famines and the death of Timang'amba, Bimbi officials have interpreted these famines as a result of the Bimbi's death.

It may also be of interest to note that during the rainy season the Bimbi rarely takes a bath except in those circumstances when the ancestral spirits direct him to do so. Normally the Bimbi takes a bath at the end of every milawe. The water for the bath is prepared by the Bimbi's spirit-wife and it is pregnant with spiritual significance.

Ad de Vries has indicated that water being a prime material an immersion as in bathing is a reversion to a previous less evolved state of existence in order to

emerge regenerated, reborn or restored.⁷⁶

It appears to me that these three things regeneration, rebirth and restoration are the latent intentions behind the Bimbi's bath after milawe which marks a break of a long or short periods of being ritually unclean.

But there is another side of this ritual uncleanliness on the part of the Bimbi. Religious uncleanness, it is said, is what is charged with dangerous, numinous magical powers and, therefore to be avoided (unless one is specially protected) so it is the same as taboo. It also means that the person, object or animal is holy since holiness is contagious.⁷⁷

The idea that the holy must be avoided because it is dangerous and contagious seems to explain why the Bimbi does not shake hands with people. Of all the taboos which Bimbi observes, the one which I personally observed is his avoiding to shake hands with people of whatever rank in society. During the Bimbi's stay with me in Zomba I tried to expose him to different and unexpected circumstances in order to see whether he might by chance shake hands with people who confronted him suddenly and unexpectedly. No single instance occurred much to the annoyance of those concerned. It must be noted that hand shaking among the Chewa and also all other social groups in Malawi is a dominant custom and it is done as if it were a reflex action. It is a sign of being friendly to the other person.

Bimbi's avoidance of shaking hands with people can be explained in two ways. First and foremost he avoids shaking hands in order to avoid contamination of impurity from the other person who may be in a state of moral uncleanness. Again Bimbi may avoid to pass on his 'magical' powers to others since these would be contagious. No explanation was given to me about this from my informants. All I could gather, according to

Kudawe Chiwere is that at his assumption of office Bimbi was told by the ancestral spirits not to shake hands with people. No one in the Upper Shire region, it is believed, has, ever since, shook hands with Bimbi.⁷⁸

It must also be noted that the peculiar observance of ritual uncleanness by Bimbi can have another interpretation. Many of the rituals of the Chewa people, which are connected with rain calling involve the smearing of mud or ashes on the worshipping participants thus making them look dirty. Women who prepare the beer for rain offering are also required not to take a bath during the whole period when beer for rain is being prepared. It seems plausible to argue that the dirtiness here is intended to show Chauta that the people are dirty and they need water (rain) to wash them through and through rendering them clean. This notion is akin with Chewa philosophy that "mvula ikakuwona litsiro siikata" (when the rain sees that you are dirty, it never stops until you have been washed clean).

Another popular interpretation of the ritual uncleanness is that it is a symbolic way of saying to the ancestral spirits and Chauta: "We have sinned against Chauta, we are sorry and repent of our sins. We need spiritual cleansing with the heavenly waters".⁷⁹

It must be borne in mind that the life of the Bimbi is affected and dominated by the rainy season which as we have seen lasts from November to March. During this period the Bimbi wears a black uniform throughout. This consists of a long black trousers, black shirt and a long cassock. All my informants close to Bimbi told me that he wears black uniform because he is mtambo (the dark cloud). As mtambo the Bimbi is expected to induce dark clouds of rain as in "like-produces-like". This symbolic wearing of the dark uniform is very important in the life of the Bimbi since rain is very crucial if plants are to grow and

people's lives secured.

Besides, within the symbolism of garments, black uniform may be intended to be a sign of superior dignity in spiritual matters as well as to cut him off from the community as a whole.

The connection between the black uniform and the clouds are of great significance. Since the clouds represent the upper waters in the sky, they are a fertility symbol and have analogous relationships with all that is destined to bring fecundity. It is said, for instance, that ancient christian symbolism interprets the clouds as synonymous with the prophet since prophecies are an occult source of fertilization, celestial in origin.⁸⁰

This description of the life of the Bimbi would be incomplete without mentioning another aspect of his life. It should be noted that during the rainy season the Bimbi also imposes upon himself a voluntary fasting which may last for three or more months. In normal circumstances this fasting is observed between October and December. Its severity depends on the climatic conditions of the time the worst coming when there is drought. The present Bimbi says he eats very little and grows thin because of the concern he has for the welfare of the people. He says, he feels as if he is carrying the burdens and concerns of all the people in the region.⁸¹

It appears plausible to argue that this fasting is an element of Islamic influence on the cult since all my informants showed ignorance of the existence of fasting in any traditional form among the Chewa. This being the case it could be concluded that fasting as a religious observance in the Bimbi system might have started as a result of the conversion of the Bimbis to Islam. However, having said this it should be observed that fasting in a number of religions is a spiritual exercise which may lead to visions and closer union with the deity, and which the Bimbis might have

incorporated within their system. The strength of Islam's influence on the Bimbi system is seen in the fact that all of the present Bimbi's wives and children are muslims. But far and above the Bimbi himself has caused a small mosque to be built in his village in order to be able to say prayers there during Ramadhan.⁸²

But something must be said here in connection with the relationship between Bimbi and the mosque. Some of my informants asserted that a long time ago Swaleyi Mkwanda used to conduct prayers in the local mosque since he was mwalimu (teacher of Islam). Later on, when he became Bimbi he gave up his call as mwalimu of Islam and when he goes to the mosque on Fridays he does not go into the mosque but sits outside by himself. Sheikh Janatu Yasin has postulated that Bimbi does not enter the mosque because he rarely washes himself and the strict mosque regulations of cleanliness require that one should wash his feet before going into the mosque for prayers.⁸³ As the case stands Bimbi might have resolved to have his own mosque (not for Friday prayers but for Ramadhan) in his village in order to avoid any conflict that might arise between him and some moslem leaders if they noticed him entering the mosque unwashed.

Bimbi is very much loved by the people because they are able to ask him things which are connected with rain which is at the centre of their hearts. "If there were no Bimbi", Kudawe Chiwere reiterated to me at one of the interviews I had with him, "we would have been in great trouble here. We would have been dead without food. Bimbi gives us freedom (ufulu). To us freedom means freedom from hunger that is when people have enough food to eat".⁸⁴

But Bimbi is not loved by everyone. There are other people who despise him and hate him and think rightly or wrongly that consulting Bimbi is a form of idolatry. This is mainly so in the case of learned

muslim sheikhs and mwalimus who, as we shall see later, have staged open confrontations against Bimbi though not with much success. The same can be said of educated christians and christian leaders who despise the Bimbi's pronouncements as utter nonsense.

The popular belief among the commoners, however, is reflected in mwalimu (Islamic teacher) Idilisa Mwangusu's words: he said to me

"I believe that Mulungu has given different people different tasks. He has given Bimbi the task of praying for rain for our life here on earth and to us muslims and christians the task of helping people with their spiritual life for the future in heaven".⁸⁵

The impact of the Bimbis among the people of the Upper Shire is based upon this basic fact that to them the Bimbis are concerned with the here and now situations, the everyday concerns of the common man in the village as he goes about scratching the soil for something to live on. The Bimbi's teaching does not promise a glorified future in heaven when people will be eating with golden spoons and dressing in dazzling white robes. The Bimbi promises nothing but an assurance to the people that Chauta is here and now and that if they are good enough he will grant them life here and now through the life-giving rain. It appears to them that the difference between the Bimbi's role and teaching on the one hand and that of Christianity and Islam on the other is that while the former is this wordly oriented the latter are too heavenly oriented and far ahead and above people's everyday needs.

The Bimbi today is more of a ritual figure than a vital force to be feared and revered for,

"the Bimbis in their golden age were highly respected people. All the people in the surrounding villages wamamlemekeza (venerated) Bimbi. Whenever people wanted rain they went to Bimbi with their offerings

[nsembe] and tributes [mitulo] to
ask him for rain".⁸⁶

The present Bimbi's life style is simple. In most cases he identifies himself with the weak, the poor, the oppressed and the suffering. With a spirit of true honesty, the Bimbi renders his services to the public without imposing on the people an unnecessary fee at least not in an obvious or regulated form which could make him relatively rich. Those who come to consult him on matters of rain are only required as a matter of necessity to produce two meters of black cloth which is instrumental in inducing rain. Any other gift brought to him is of secondary importance and handled either by his wives or his officials.

As far as my evidence goes, Bimbi does not use objects or recite spells in order to influence natural events such as drought conditions. The Bimbi seeks to divert meteorological disturbances through sacrifices, public atonement or other virtuous practices. His main belief consists of a fanatic conviction that the anger of Chauta or Mulungu and the ancestral spirits which leads to drought and famine is caused by either personal or corporate sin in the community or social disorganization as when people quarrel among themselves.

This appears to be in line with Max Weber's view that "to the prophet both the life of man and the world, both social and cosmic events, have a certain systematic and coherent meaning to which man's conduct must be oriented if it is to bring salvation and after which it must be patterned in an integrally meaningful manner".⁸⁷

This account of the Bimbi's life would ~~again~~ be incomplete without making reference to his work as a healer (ng'anga). Almost everyday I visited Bimbi in his village I used to notice that many people, on an average of twenty people per day from nearby villages and others as far as fifty miles away, came to consult him

on various diseases. Those whom I interviewed claimed that his medicine is very effective and that his method of diagnosis does not involve divination in the conventional sense of the word in that he does not use divinatory objects such as beads, horns, mirrors or written pieces of paper in Arabic as is common practice in the area. My informants had it that Bimbi uses his spiritual knowledge as is given to him by his ancestral spirits to determine the cause and the cure of a particular disease. Having determined the cause Bimbi himself decides what type of medicine the patient should take and gives it to him for as long as he feels necessary until the patient is healed.

It appears that many of the people who go to consult Bimbi for physical healing are usually women and even men who have been in marriage for sometime but have failed to have children. Bimbi said this to me at one of the interviews I had with him. He said:

"I am expert in treating people who have failed to bear children in their families. I have special mankhwala woberekera (medicine for child bearing) which is very effective. When I give this mankhwala to a couple I am absolutely sure that it is going to work. If my mankhwala does not work, I tell the couple concerned to forget that they will ever bear a child no matter where they went for further treatment. This is because my mankhwala do not fail given favourable conditions".⁸⁸

Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi claims that he did not discover this mankhwala by himself. It was the ancestral spirits who appeared to him in dreams and showed him the medicine. Since then he has used the medicine to help many people some of whom had lost all hope of being able to bear a child in their lifetime.⁸⁹

It appears that Bimbi's role as a ng'anga (medicine man) especially in connection with the fertility of the people who consult him is akin to his role as Bimbi. It is commonplace in religious systems

that healing occupies an important place in the mission of the religious leader. This is because healing is not only an act of restoring someone to good health but also is a religious act in that the healing process involves the whole man - body, soul, and spirit.

CHAPTER 2

THE MAKING OF A BIMBI AND THE QUESTION OF SUCCESSION

In this section attempts will be made to discuss the making of the Bimbi and the question of succession simultaneously since the two interlock. The Bimbi cult is remarkably unique in the way in which from time to time it supplies itself with a cultic figure who acts as representative, spokesman, high priest, rain-caller and guardian of the cultural heritage of the Chewa of the Upper Shire region.

But in order to understand this uniqueness it is essential that first and foremost the Chewa system of succession to village headmanship or chieftaincy be examined here. For it is within this framework of reference that my informants believe that the call to Bimbiship is a divine act.

a Succession to headmanship among the Chewa

It is important to bear in mind that the Chewa are a matrilineal society whose rules of inheritance and succession are based on principles of matrilineage. Among the Chewa the matrilineage commonly known as bele (breast) is viewed as consisting of men and women who can trace their descent from a common ancestress (kholo). The ancestress is looked upon as the tsinde of the lineage. Scott in his Dictionary of the Mang'anja Language, defines tsinde as the base, root, or foot of a tree. It is also used for a stalk or trunk.¹ Hence the bele conveys an image of a tree with the kholo as the trunk, the base, and the roots while the members are its branches. Thus the kholo occupies a very distinguished position in the history of the lineage.

It is worthy of note that in each succeeding generation all collateral members are divided into

two groups. All the women constitute what is called mbumba (dependants) and all the men are known as Nkhoswe (singular) or Ankhoswe (plural) (guardian(s)).

The most senior uncle (msibweni) or brother in a lineage is known as Mwini mbumba (the owner of the dependants) and is ultimately responsible for the overall welfare of his mbumba, politically, socially, economically and in religious matters. In all cases sisters tend to look at their brothers as their immediate nkhoswe (guardian) and the brothers look at their sisters as their immediate mbumba.

It is interesting to note that in a typical or ideal social context, the power and authority of the Nkhoswe depends largely on the number of his mbumba. The larger the number the better. A man without his mbumba is powerless and of little socio-political influence since it is his mbumba who sing praises for him thus giving him social prestige. They also champion for his cause if there are any rivals to his traditional political power and also make the beer for libation to the ancestral spirits with whom he must be at one in order to guarantee the continuity of the lineage.

Thus the mbumba is a very significant and important component in Chewa lineage structure and traditional politics. The mbumba are by and large classified in terms of seniority based on the primacy of birth of each succeeding household in relation to the founding ancestress. The senior mbumba is known as bele lalikuru (senior breast) and the junior mbumba is known as bele laling'ono. The senior breast has far more rights, privileges and duties than the junior breast.

The mbumba depends largely on their ankhoswe (guardians) for their social security primarily in their marriage affairs and also whenever they are involved in inter- and intra-lineage conflicts. A cluster of houses belonging to two or more breasts form

a village and the head of the village is called mwini mudzi (Village headman). Rules of succession to village headmanship is based on the norms of matrilineage that is on the basis of bele social structure. As Abasi ku-Tambala aptly puts it:

"We the Chewa when a village headman dies his nephew succeeds him. It must be the eldest son of the eldest sister [mwana wa mamuna wa bele lalikuru]. Sometimes after the death of a village headman people in the village may decide that the headmanship pass to the junior breast [bele laling'ono]. Then the first son of the immediate young sister can succeed to the village headmanship. This is done in order to ensure that the junior breasts [mawere ang'ono] [plural] do not feel cut off from the lineage but that they are part and parcel of the family group. This passing on of village headmanship to junior sisters can go on to the junior most breast but at the end of the day it must go back to the senior breast and the cycle starts all over again".²

Another common practice is that a young brother succeeds his brother to the headmanship. Ideally no son can succeed his father to village headmanship or chieftainship as is the case among the Ngoni whose succession is based on principles of patrilineage. But sons provide a very important mechanism of transition between the death of a village headman and the assumption of a new one.

According to village headman Sumani Salimu Chiyaka, it is common practice among the Chewa that when a village headman dies at the time of burial the dead body is brought outside. Then

"We invite all the mourners to come near. When this is done we call one of the dead person's sons and we tell him to take charge of the affairs of the village. This care taker is called Chibwana. We ask him to come near the coffin and tell him to look after the affairs of the villagers. This is done in order to avoid conflict

and infighting between the nephews of the dead village headman each of whom may be thinking that he will inherit the village headmanship. In fact the village headmanship is dissolved temporarily in order to sort out things between the claimants. Chibwana runs all the affairs of the village".³

But this arrangement does not go on indefinitely and a new village headman must be sought among the brothers and nephews of the deceased. To this effect Chibwana assisted by a neighbourly village headman assembles all the sisters of the deceased village headman to a private meeting in a house. They discuss who should be the successor to the village headmanship among the nephews of the dead village headman. The senior sister is asked first for fear, so it is believed, that if the junior sisters accept the offer first the successor may be bewitched by the sons of the senior sister.⁴

But more often than not there are quarrels as to who should succeed. Abasi Tambala, the present Chibwana (caretaker) in the ku-Tambala village headmanship has indicated that succession disputes among the Chewa are endemic.

According to him succession conflicts are caused by a number of factors rooted deep in history.

Sometimes there are conflicts when mkazi wofwambidwa's (a kidnapped woman in pre-colonial period) children claim the headmanship since they are descendants of a slave woman. At other times there are conflicts when mkazi-wa-magazi's (payment of blood) children claim the right of succession. Mkazi-wa-magazi was payment made to a brother after his sister, married to someone, died because of ill-treatment such as beating. There are also conflicts over succession as a result of witchcraft accusations especially when there are frequent deaths among the members of the ruling house. Such accusations in

the past led to the summoning of a mwabvi (poison ordeal) person to come and purify the village.

Quite often it was found that bele limodzi (one breast) would run away while the others drunk mwabvi. In cases of this nature those who run away if they came back into the village were and are looked upon as outsiders and as such their claim to village headmanship can be rejected. If those who ran away were members of the senior breast (bele lalikuru) their right of succession to village headmanship is by and large questioned.

When there is no solution in a succession dispute chibwana can succeed his father. This happens when members of the mbumba of the deceased village headman are incapable of administering the village either because they are young or they do not have qualities of administering others. The son (chibwana) rules until death. After chibwana dies the village headmanship goes back to the members of the mbumba of the former village headman. This depends on whether they have ~~someone~~ capable of ruling them. When the son, succeeds his father, on no account can his nephew succeed him. The headmanship ends with him. But sometimes the son can marry a member of his father's mbumba. For example he can marry his cousin. In that case if the rightful heirs still prove incapable of ruling the mbumba then, chibwana's son can succeed his father but in that case he is looked upon as a rightful heir. The people whom chibwana can marry within his father's mbumba are his cousin (msuwani wake) or his cousin's daughter (mwana wa msuwani wake).⁵

It is interesting to note that sometimes a quarrel over succession may compel the senior chief of an area to conduct a vote of confidence between rivals to the village headmanship. The mbumba are normally asked to vote between two candidates. The one who has many votes is taken and installed as a village headman.⁶

b Succession in the Bimbi cult: The Bimbi a choice of the spirits

We have seen in the account given above that in traditional politics of the Chewa the mbumba play a major, if not a decisive, role in the choice and making of a village headman or chief. They influence policy making and sometimes give direction to the affairs of the lineage as a whole. We have seen that in normal circumstances when a village headman (mwini mudzi) or chief dies, it is the duty of the immediate female and male senior members of the lineage to find a replacement since a village or a chiefdom without its head cannot stand the test of time.

But agreement as to the possible successor may not be easily reached at by either the mbumba or the ankhoswe especially if the name or title being sought is an important one and if they suspect foul play within the system. Cases when seats have lain vacant indefinitely are not unknown in the traditional politics of the Chewa.

What is remarkable about the Bimbi cult is that the Bimbiship is said to be from beginning to end a divine call. No one chooses a Bimbi; no one is elected to be Bimbi. No one installs a Bimbi as Bimbi in the manner in which secular authorities do but only to the extent that he is also a village headman. The occupants of that office are chosen by the spirits. It is the spirits who determine who should be the next Bimbi when one dies. The choice and the message is determined by the spirits alone and not by human agents such as the mbumba and ankhoswe.

All my informants within the inner circle of the Bimbi officials and those outside persistently and unanimously asserted that neither the living Bimbi nor the officials at court make a personal choice, appoint or elect a successor. The question of succession is left alone and not tampered with by human agencies.

According to Nandumbo Kasira even if all the village headmen and traditional authorities in the region met together and wished to make a Bimbi, they could not dare choose someone and make a Bimbi for themselves.⁷

Unlike secular headmanship in which a possible successor maybe known by members of the sorority group and the general public it is not so with the way in which one succeeds to Bimbiship. No one, not even the members of the Bimbi line, know or can speculate who would succeed the ruling Bimbi after he dies. The whole process is begun and completed by the inspiration of the spirits of the dead Bimbi. Swaleyi Mkwanda puts it this way:

"even now I do not know who will succeed me, however, when the days are near I will be able to know by revelation from the spirits who will succeed me but I won't name him. My spirit will possess that person when I die. I cannot of my own accord choose someone to succeed me as Bimbi. Our system is different from other secular systems.

Among the Ngoni the son succeeds his father. The father actually names the person who will succeed him as chief or as village headman. Among us the Chewa the nephew succeeds his uncle, or a young brother his elder brother or sister. This is not the case with us. I do not know who will succeed me and it is not possible for such a person to know in advance and begin to talk about it in the neighbourhood.

Our system is this. When a female Bimbi dies she is succeeded by a male Bimbi and when a male Bimbi dies he is succeeded by a female Bimbi".⁸

Thus we see from the account given above that it is the spirit (mzimu) of the deceased Bimbi which by possessing someone, chooses a successor. The person possessed can be a grandson, a son, nephew, daughter or sister within the Bimbi lineage. At one of the interviews I had with Anubi Chipande CheKwenda he pointed out to me that the following spirits are

involved in the choice of a Bimbi. These are Mkulukutwa, Bongwe, Zembe, Sakasaka, Namanje, Thombolombo and Nyangu. All these are Chewa ancestral spirits connected with the Maravi of the Phiri clan. They were political heads closely related to the Bimbi lineage.⁹

Since the choice is made at a random by the ancestral spirits there seems to be no organized formal training at all in the arts of Bimbiship. The call and the message are all received from the spirits. Here we are faced with the question of continuity. All my informants told me that there are no objects or memorized incantations which are passed on from the old Bimbi to the new Bimbi. The continuity, so it is argued, is effected in the fact that it is the same spirit of Bimbiship which, originating from the first Bimbi, possesses each and every succeeding Bimbi after one's term of office is over and a new Bimbi called for.

Being a spiritual activity, the Bimbis seem to have an indelible character of Bimbiship. For instance there seems to have been no time when a Bimbi was deposed because he lost favour with the people because of misconduct. The people cannot reject a Bimbi even if they so wished. This is because they are powerless without the spirits, over whom they have no control, in determining who should be Bimbi. The Bimbi once chosen by the spirits of the land serves for life (amakhala Bimbi mpaka muyaya). It is the spirits who depose a Bimbi through possession unto death and it is the same spirits who choose a new Bimbi. Besides in no account can a Bimbi resign from his Bimbiship. Once chosen he has been chosen for life and there has been no time in the history of Bimbiship during which any Bimbi gave up his call because of his personal reasons or circumstances forcing him to do so.¹⁰

It is interesting to note that no individual can

be certain of being chosen and possessed by the spirits on grounds of good works. External appearances in terms of good work, therefore, do not apply. They are not a guarantee of being chosen. Chiyaka, however, has indicated that the spirits may possess several people in instalment to test their hearts until a final choice is made.¹¹

It is important to note that there is only one Bimbi at a time in the whole of the Upper Shire to whom village headmen from more than six traditional authorities flock for consultations on matters concerning rain. At the moment there are no effective competitors to that much coveted title. The uniqueness of the Bimbiship lies in the permanence and persistence of the signs of spirit possession by the incumbent. To make this point clear let us take the example of Misaku abiti Ndelemanani of Chindamba village at Malindi in Mangochi. From what she described to me at one of the interviews I had with her, the title Bimbi could be applied to her as well but with one great exception. She is no longer possessed now. The spirit has come out of her. Abiti Ndelemanani's own testimony is very revealing. She stated to me:

"When I knew that there was going to be a drought, I Misaku bitu Ndelemanani would stay without food, drink and could not speak to people. This started when I was already a grown up. It started when I was already married. Long time ago it started with abiti Chuma. She was related to me. She came from Fort Maguire [Makanjila]. She was married here to Chitute. Many people used to come here to consult her. They came from as far as Makanjila and even Mpondas. She was still alive during Hitler's war.

After her death the spirits possessed another woman. Her name was che Losayaga. She died long time ago. After she died then the spirits began to possess me. When I was possessed I used to come to report here to chief Chindamba. It is the spirit of old Chindamba who appeared to me in dreams and told me to tell this and that to the chief. But now we think che Mbite might succeed me. It is

eight years now since I last had dreams about rain. It is che Mbite and another woman who dream these days about rain. When the spirits come upon me I only feel sick and hear and see nothing at all".¹²

It may be of interest to note that there is a correlation between the way in which the Bimbi cult replenishes its Bimbis and the way in which the Chisumphi cult among the Chewa people at Msinja filled the position of Makewana (the mother of children). The position of Makewana is said to have always been occupied by possession effected by the spirit of the deceased Makewana. As a matter of fact, according to Rangeley, when Makewana died she was never referred to as having died ... the deceased Makewana was said to be visiting God and when a new Makewana did appear she was said to be sent by God.¹³

We have seen that the emphasis on the making of a Bimbi is on spirit possession. Without this no succession can take place. It appears to me that this element of spirit possession has a number of sociological functions. To start with by negating the traditionally prescribed mechanisms of assuming political power it resolves conflicts of succession to a position which is highly competitive. Though the Bimbis are to some extent a spent force, lacking their former popularity and respect, they still occupy a prestigious position in the social structure as a power to reckon with especially in spiritual matters. It would, however, be misleading to assume that there have been no pretenders in the history of succession to Bimbiship. For instance Abasi Tambala of Tambala Village stated to me that when Timang'amba Bimbi died sometime in 1927 some people pretended to behave as if they were possessed. One of them was Mkwanda the father of the present Bimbi. He was one of Timang'amba's sons. Another one was Majawa one of Bimbi Timang'amba's nephews. Although Mkwanda and Majawa pretended to

be possessed their claim was rejected by the people.¹⁴

Another version of the same story is that which was recounted to me by Kudawe Chiwere. Kudawe has it that:

Mkwanda the son of Bimbi and che Ku-Malekano, Bimbi Nkholinkholi's¹⁵ nephew hoped that at the death of Bimbi they would succeed to Bimbiship. When Bimbi died his wives were sent to their respective villages. He had many wives. In one of the families he had three daughters. They were sent to Mkanda village. Mkwanda and Malekano hoped that they would be the successors.

During the rainy season when ku-Malekano was looking after his maize against monkeys he would pretend as if he were possessed by spirits. He used to kubwebweta alone. This he did in order to be considered quickly as the new Bimbi. He used to say aloud.

"Bwanji mukuchedwetsa?" [Why are you delaying?]

"Bimbi siyemweyo?" [is not that same one your Bimbi?]

His hut was near a road, if people stopped by the side of the path he used to say:

"Bimbi ndi yemweyo ku-Malekano" [ku-Malekano is Bimbi]

"Mgwireni" [make him Bimbi]

People then used to surprise him saying "who are you?" When he heard this he would jump into the bush and disappear. This was repeated every week because he was so impatient that the spirits were late in possessing him and making him Bimbi. But the spirits decided otherwise, instead of possessing ku-Malekano they possessed a girl and drove her into the forest.

Mkwanda did not pretend all that much and when he saw what had happened he gave up and since then they have been no more pretenders.¹⁶

The issue of pretenders raises at once a very important question. How does one distinguish between true possession to Bimbiship and false possession? According to Kudawe Chiwere what distinguishes a Bimbi proper and a pretender is that the Bimbi enters into the

heavenly council of the ancestral spirits who are in control of rain and does not show signs of physical sickness. If someone pretends to be possessed he becomes sick because he does not participate in the council of the ancestral spirits his sickness being the sign of this.¹⁷ Nandumbo Kasira has it that a true Bimbi must first be possessed. Secondly, he must climb the njale tree and thirdly, he must go to Mponda forest.¹⁸ Afiki ku-Malekano has indicated that the signs of true Bimbiship, consist in abstaining from food and drink for a month, climbing the njale tree and possession by the spirits.¹⁹ Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka, has pointed out that Bimbis and Mtsamilas are supposed to utter a prophecy during an examination which must become true and their names vindicated.²⁰

These signs especially the possession aspect to Bimbiship bring us face to face with another important factor. They curb the ambitions of those who would be rivals to this holy office. This means that faction groups and their supporters do not exist at the moment, at least, in an organized form. The confidence and the tremendous spiritual power that the Bimbi acquires as a result of his being possessed makes him impregnable against forces which are constantly engaged to discredit him or even to kill him.

The act of possession also distinguishes the Bimbiship from what the present Bimbi calls the village headman of the book²¹ and his own which he calls spiritual village headmanship. The Bimbi, by most oral accounts, is a charismatic leader in the Weberian sense of a figure who is treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman powers or qualities on the basis of which the individual concerned is treated as leader.²²

The Call

The following account of the call to Bimbiship

and the rituals involved in the making of a Bimbi is an ideal description of the events as recounted to me by a number of my informants. It is very likely that in real life situations the processes vary from individual to individual. According to Abasi Tambala when a person is possessed by the spirits as a call to Bimbiship amawoneka ngati akudwala misala (he appears as if he were mad). He shouts, climbs trees and moves around anywhere. The first signs of Bimbiship are reported to ku-Tambala first and no one else. Abasi Tambala claims that he is the grandson of Timang'amba Bimbi on the father's side. The reporter is said to be always che ku-Malekano a leading councillor within the Bimbi lineage.²³ According to oral traditions recounted to me by Ali Nyama, on the day when signs of possession reach a climax many people from the surrounding villages converge into the Bimbi village to see what is happening and eventually to take part in the rituals which lead to the making of a Bimbi. They all assemble in front of the house of the possessed person. They sing and clap their hands. They sing thus mentioning only the names of Chewa ancestral spirits:

A Nyangu

A Sokopio

A Namanje

A Chibalala

A Mchelecheta

A Mkulukutwa

Kodi uyu ndi Bimbi

[tell us is this Bimbi?]

Ali Nyama has it that when the possessed hears this song he is seized by these spirits. This is accompanied by convulsions and shouting aloud unintelligently (kubwebweta). Then suddenly he comes out of the house and runs into the bush shouting as if he were mad. The people also run after him but he runs faster than

any other person in the group. What is special in this ceremony is the climbing of a special tree commonly called njale - Sterculia appendiculata.²⁴ All my informants asserted that the Bimbis climb only this type of tree and no other. The Bimbi and his officials say that they do not know why the Bimbis climb this particular tree. What is significant, however, is that a tree is involved in the process and trees among the Chewa seem to be imputed with spiritual power which lies far beyond their physical properties. Aã de Vries has indicated that trees are symbols of cosmic life a prodigious growth towards heaven. The tree connects the three worlds: its roots are in the under world, its trunk on earth and its foliage in heaven. It is thus a symbol of perpetual regeneration victory over death and at a far higher level a symbol of immortality.²⁵ This may, by implication, be the meaning of the climbing of the njale tree. For the Bimbi, by and large, is a kind of bridge between the physical world and the spiritual forces in heaven and people believe that through his activities they can have the life-giving rain.

When word reaches ku-Tambala that the possessed person has climbed the njale tree he in turn sends ku-Malekano to address the possessed in these words:

"If you are Bimbi I command you to come down from the tree and then go down to the shrine or in any other house you wish".²⁶

If the possessed complies with this command then ku-Tambala comes to examine him whether he is true Bimbi or not. Meanwhile ku-Tambala sends Mposa to inform the Group village headman Namdumbo about this. Nandumbo and Mposa in turn go to tell chief Kalembo. By and large the chief does not take action but leaves everything in the hands of the Chewa themselves who understand the meaning of the rituals surrounding the making of a Bimbi. Word is also sent to village

headman Msungu for him to inform chief Liwonde about this.

The anointing in the waters of the Shire River

When the ritual of climbing and descending the njale tree is over the Bimbi 'elect' runs down to Mponda Forest and plunges himself into the water fifty yards away from the shrine. All this time people sing, clap their hands and dance. Once in the water a new song is sung. They sing thus led by ku-Tambala:

A Nyangu
 A Sokopio
 A Namanje
 A Chibalala
 A Mchelecheta
 A Mkulukutwa
 Munthu amene ali m'madziyo
 [if that man in the water]
 Ngati ali Bimbi mutipatse
 [if he is Bimbi send him back to us]
 Ngati Sali Bimbi afele mmadzi momwemo
 [If he is not let him die there in the water]

According to Ali Nyama this is the most critical point in the long and complex process of making a Bimbi. It is common belief that it is at this time that the Bimbi elect is anointed and commissioned by the ancestral spirits to be their representative and spokesman to the people round about. The anointing and the commissioning is believed to be done by Nyangu, Sokopio, Namanje and Chibalala all of them legendary Chewa heads of the past now very important ancestral spirits,²⁷ and believed to live in the waters of the Shire.

The ritual at the 'lake shore' appears to have great theological significance. Here water, as in many

other religious institutions, plays a crucial role. By going into the water the Bimbi enacts the symbolic acts of death and resurrection. The new Bimbi undergoes a process of death and burial by immersion in the water and he comes back to new life as he emerges from the water. One of my informants put it in this way.

"The Bimbi dies and wakes up, and he dies again and he wakes up again".²⁸

It may also be pointed out that the ritual at the river side may signify fertility and the progressive irrigation of the soil. This ties up significantly with the Bimbi cult which in a sense is a fertility cult concerned with the productivity of the soil by the fertilizing rain water symbolic of life.

It appears plausible to say that it is the symbolic death and resurrection enacted in the water which is the decisive factor in the transitional process from being a commoner into becoming a Bimbi. It is at this point that the person chosen by the spirits, is enabled, through the rituals at the river side to participate directly in the affairs of the spirit world. He can now be called akumidzimu or even mzimu (one who belongs to the spirit world, the spirit) since he is the incarnation of the previous Bimbis.

The symbolism of death is, according to V. Turner, typical of the liminal stage in initiation ceremonies and seems to emphasize the separation of the individual from an earlier fixed point in the social structure to a new and far superior position in a new social structure. The initiand 'dies' in order to shed off the old self and puts on the new one.²⁹

The examination

It is important to bear in mind that spirit possession, as we have already seen, is only one aspect of a long process of Bimbi-making. After the ritual

of immersion in the waters of the Shire which at that point is commonly known as the 'Lake' is over, the candidate undergoes a rigorous examination to test his credentials. Apart from answering correctly to the questions set before him he must prove by a sign or signs that he is a genuine Bimbi. If the candidate answers correctly in the manner of the former Bimbi and performs a miracle, then he receives social recognition proper to people occupying that position. This seems to be in line with Weber's contention that it is social recognition on the part of the subjects which is decisive for the validity of charismatic authority. This is said to be freely given and guaranteed by what is held to be a sign or proof, originally always a miracle and consists in devotion to the corresponding revelation, hero worship or absolute trust in the leader.³⁰

The testing happens at night at about 6.00pm in the shrine at Mponda. When the new Bimbi and the people reach the shrine they take off their upper garments and the liturgical dialogue between the people and the new Bimbi begins. The testing is conducted by che ku-Tambala. This ritual is called milawe which I translate here as seance. The following account remembered by Ali Nyama and verified by Abasi Tambala is said to have taken place when Akumbirika Mtsamila II was made Bimbi in 1927 and considered as the standard format.

Bimbi inside:	I have come I Mtsamila [if she is female] or I have come I <u>Mchinjika</u> [if he is male]
Ku-Tambala	"Are you Bimbi?"
Bimbi	"Yes, I am Bimbi".
Ku-Tambala	"If you are Bimbi we shall see. What did you see in the waters?"
Bimbi	"I saw the spirits of my ancestors in the water".

Ku-Tambala "Can you tell us who they were?"

Bimbi "Yes, they were Sokopio, Namanje, Chibalala, Nyangu and Mkulukutwa".³¹

Ku-Tambala "What have they told you?"

Bimbi "They have told me that I am the new Bimbi. This year there will be very dangerous rains. There will be lightning. People who live near rivers must move away because there will be floods. There will be heavy rains and a lot of water. This is the message I received from my ancestor's spirits. Anyone who fails to take my word seriously will be killed either by flood or lightning. My ancestors also told me to ask the Paramount chief to bring here a piece of black cloth".

Ku-Tambala "What will happen if we bring to you a piece of black cloth?"

Bimbi "It will rain and you will leave this place wet".

The people bring a piece of black cloth to test him. The Bimbi covers the shrine with the black cloth. It suddenly thunders. Rain falls heavily.

Ku-Tambala "We now believe that you are Bimbi. Can you tell us what will happen tomorrow?"

Bimbi "Tomorrow you can move in the morning but not in the afternoon. There will be heavy rain till late evening. Tomorrow there will be plenty of fish in the rivers. You will be catching them with your hands in the flooded fields".

Ku-Tambala "Can you tell us what the weather shall be like this year? Can you tell us what will happen this year?"

Bimbi "This year there shall be plenty of rain or this year there will be drought. This year such and such a thing will happen. People should plant on such and such a date because the rain will be good".³²

When this has been said and the questioning time is over che Ku-Tambala and the people go back to their respective villages. Meanwhile Bimbi himself remains in seclusion in the shrine for some days. When the rainy season approaches che Ku-Tambala again goes to see Bimbi again and tells him that people in the land want to start planting. Bimbi would tell him to tell people to wait until the second rains come because that will be the best rain, or he may tell Ku-Tambala to plant at the first rains.

If the prophecy of the person claiming to be Bimbi is fulfilled during that rainy season then people take him for granted to be Bimbi. Che ku-Tambala does not examine the claimant to Bimbiship by himself, alone. He does this with the help of village headmen,³³ around the Bimbi village in order for them to be witnesses of what is being said by the Bimbi elect and also to be witnesses in the future when prophecies made by Bimbi are fulfilled or not fulfilled. During the rainy season, it is these village headmen led by ku-Tambala who go to Bimbi to enquire about rain from him. They watch whether or not his prophecies are going to be fulfilled. If these prophecies are not fulfilled then the people discover that the claimant to Bimbiship is a fake and is accordingly rejected.³⁴ So far, however, we have no specific examples of this happening in real life as described above.

It is interesting to note that the idea of subjecting the new Bimbi to a rigorous test in order to prove his call is not peculiar to the Bimbi cult. In fact it was the standard procedure for selecting

the successor to the position of Makewana at the older Shrine at Msinja in central Malawi. W.H. Rangeley has documented that on the death of Makewana, who was never referred to as having died because God cannot die, there was considerable delay until a new Makewana appeared. He writes:

"Mangadzi [Makewana] was a woman of the Phiri clan. After her death a woman of any clan might be Makewana. A new Makewana was found when a woman appeared at Msinja and uttered strange prophecies [kubwebweta] and behaved in a manner to show that the spirits had entered her. She had furthermore to answer satisfactorily questions put to her by the Msinja functionaries, led by Kamundi. If she was satisfactory in all respects she was led to the hut of Makewana and entered there in and commenced their duties ... An impostor found false on inquiry had stones fastened about her neck and she was thrown into the Diampwe River".³⁵

Rangeley's account is supported by that of Rita-Ferreira. According to him a number of rival candidates normally appeared after the death of Makewana. These behaved as if they had been possessed by the spirits. They were put under a difficult test and if they proved to be impostors they were drowned.³⁶

Bimbi oral traditions are silent on the kind of punishment inflicted on those whom at one point or another are proved to be impostors. Much of the information I collected from my informers indicated that no physical harm is caused to them. When such people are found out only become a laughing stock and rejected by the society at large. They eventually become social isolates.

The coming out ceremony

After three days of retreat in the shrine during

which the Bimbi is believed to enter into communion with his or her ancestral spirits, the ritual of the coming out ceremony from the shrine follows. This is another important step in the transitional processes to Bimbiship. A crowd of people from the surrounding villages led by ku-Tambala and other senior members of the Bimbi lineage go to the shrine. They are required to take off their upper garments before they reach there. They take with them a young girl³⁷ who has not yet reached puberty. At this ritual the girl is said to be ritually married to Bimbi. And it is her duty to take him out of the shrine and back to the village.

When ku-Tambala, the elders and the people go to the shrine the girl carries a basket of ufa wa mapira (sorghum flour). A few things must be said here before proceeding further. First and foremost the involvement of the young girl in this ritual is highly symbolic. J.C. Cirlot has indicated that a child is a symbol of the future as opposed to the old man who signifies the past. And not only that the child is also symbolic of that stage of life when the old man transformed acquires a new simplicity. But far and above the child is symbolic of the mystic centre and as the youthful reawakening force.³⁸ The association therefore, between the new Bimbi and the young girl is very significant. Having died to the old self it is not surprising then that a new beginning is required in the social-sexual life of the Bimbi full of mystic power and life in its fulness.

The basket too which the young girl carries is also pregnant with symbolic meaning. Ad de Vries has indicated that the basket is a symbol of fertility in general.³⁹ It stands for the maternal body, therefore used here to enhance the notion of productivity of the mother earth through the symbolic act of ritual marriage between the young girl and the Bimbi.

It is interesting to note that Sorghum dochna

(mapira) is commonly used in the traditional offerings to the deity among the Chewa of the Upper Shire Valley.⁴⁰ Its significance, however, is not yet fully understood. My own impression is that since mapira is drought resistant, mapira flour in the hands of the young girl may be a symbol of preservation.

Once at the shrine ku-Tambala and all the people with him stand outside and sing a song called ngayaye. They sing as the girl goes inside thus:

Ngayaye tiye kumudzi [brother let us go home]
Ngayaye tiye kumudzi [brother let us go home].

In this song they invite the Bimbi to come out from the shrine and go home to the village. As people sing and clap their hands it is believed that a snake spirit, a python, comes out from the shrine together with the girl and the new Bimbi. According to Anubi Chipande Chekwenda this python is the spirit of one of the eldest members of the Bimbi lineage called Bongwe and which inhabits the shrine from times immemorial.⁴¹ Once outside, the Bimbi, the girl and the python - Bongwe - go several times round the shrine while the girl keeps on supplying the snake spirit with some flour. All this time the people are said to be still standing outside singing and clapping their hands. After several rounds the Bimbi, the snake spirit and the girl go inside the shrine again and once there the girl holds the Bimbi by hand and asks him to come out and go with her to the village. Ali Nyama maintains that if the spirits are willing the Bimbi goes out forthwith. But sometimes he is held up by the spirits until late afternoon that day and then he is left free to go.⁴²

From the shrine the Bimbi goes first to the njale tree which he climbed before going down to the river. It is while he is there that ku-Tambala gives him a piece of black cloth which he wears round his

head to mark him out that he is Bimbi of the people. From there he goes back to his house in the village and he is kept in semi-seclusion until the day of his installation.⁴³

The installation ceremony

It must be stressed here that the Bimbi apart from being a spiritual leader is also a village headman under group village headman Nandumbo Kasira. The installation ceremony that follows is designed primarily to invest upon him his secular powers and authority within the context of the socio-political structure of the Upper Shire Valley. They install him as a village headman.

In Chewa traditional political structure, when a candidate is installed as village headman he is said to have entered the name - kulowa dzina or eaten the name kudya dzina. By assuming the name of the deceased village headman or chief it appears as if the deceased village headman or chief himself is back to life to attend the affairs of his chiefdom or village. In this context it seems plausible to argue that the village headman or Chewa chief is a symbol of immortality of his social group since he offers the continuity of his corporate group or chiefdom. He is the link between the dead, the living and those yet to be born. A Chewa chief or village headman never "dies", he always comes back in the person of another chief or village headman, his successor, who rules on his behalf as if it were he himself ruling. In view of this, the installation ceremony is a very important ritual in the making of a Bimbi as a political power.

After a week, ku-Tambala summons Bimbi's mbumba and addresses them in the following words:

"You have seen that now we have a new Bimbi. We must now make beer for the installation ceremony. Those who will be involved in the making of the beer

must not have sexual intercourse in their families. If you do the ancestors are not going to accept your beer because it is defiled. You must now prepare chimela [malt] for the beer."⁴⁴

It is said that sometimes some people disregard this warning and have sexual intercourse in their families supposing that they will not be found out. But much to their surprise, so it is said, they are soon found out by Bimbi. On the appointed day before the beer is offered part of it is taken to Bimbi to "smell it out" to see whether it is pure or defiled. Those who break the rules of the sex taboo are denounced in public and their beer is thrown away. It is assumed that it cannot be accepted by the spirits because it is impure and if offered it can only bring condemnation and punishment upon the people.

At the installation ceremony a huge crowd of people gather in the Bimbi village. Many Chewa village headmen as well as some Yao heads of lineages come to attend the ceremony. Among them is Group Village Headman Nandumbo Kasira representing paramount Chief Kalembo and Group Village Headman Msungu representing paramount Chief Liwonde. The two chiefs are represented at this ceremony for reasons which will be explained later.⁴⁵

The ceremony begins at 8.00am by taking some beer to the shrine. A group of elders led by ku-Malekano accompany the girl - the ritual wife of Bimbi - to the shrine. With her there are other four girls carrying small pots of beer. When they reach the shrine they put the beer inside and the elders together with the girls wait for some hours outside. Later on in the day the elders go inside the shrine to find out what has happened. Tradition has it that much to their surprise they find that the pots of beer are half empty and to them this is a clear indication that their offering has been accepted by the ancestral spirits. This is also taken as a further sign that the new Bimbi

is a true Bimbi beyond any reasonable doubt.⁴⁶

After the offering at the shrine is over the elders go back to the village to install the new Bimbi. All this time women and other spectators are around well organised with their traditional dances. In the evening at about 7.00pm the new Bimbi is taken to any house near the courtyard and made to sit first at the door post. A piece of cloth is laid before him on the verandah. Then all his mbumba come forward with money in their hands and put on the piece of cloth before him saying each time as they would say to any other new village headman:

"You Bimbi, you must give up what you were doing before. Look after us now."⁴⁷

The goodness and badness of the new village headman is made public at this time and every now and then as people continue to give him gifts they tell him to give up evil ways - short temperedness - anger, etc., and encourage him to continue his good behaviour - love, care, etc.

After this the money is collected and the candidate asked to enter into the house. Once inside the house a drum is brought forward to give him mwambo (moral teaching). The inclusion of the drum in this ceremony is highly symbolic and of great importance. In the words of J.E. Cirlot the drum is "a symbol of primordial sound and a vehicle for the word, for tradition and for magic. In Africa the drum is associated with the heart. In the most "primitive" cultures as in the most advanced, it is equated with the sacrificial altar and hence it acts as a mediator between heaven and earth."⁴⁸ My informants did not explain, however, why the drum is used at this occasion. My own assumption is that it is used here as a means of communication to enhance the meaning of the mwambo to the recipient if we accept the theory that the drum speaks right into the heart of the African man.

Thus a song is sung to the accompaniment of

the sound of the drum. At the end of each song, which is sung by one or two village headmen, at a time, the meaning is revealed to the candidate and he is told to change his ways to chiefly behaviour. They sing thus:

"Nyumba ya mzati umodzi siima
Imafuna ina mmbalimu"

[A house with one pole does not stand.
It needs other poles around]

Here the one pole is the new village headman himself and the other poles are his counsellors vital for ruling his people. He must listen to them. After the singing is over the village headmen give the new village headman further mwambo. They say thus:

"You are now mfumu. You have entered the name. People are always troublesome. A leper is your person. You must respect yourself. If you do so other people will respect you. You must work hard in the field. You will be receiving people here with various complaints. A leper is your man. If people come here with their bribes you must refuse. You must not favour the rich. Be a good man. Look after your mbumba well. We do not want divisions here. Let this village be what it was like before. Increase its prosperity."⁴⁹

After he has been told this at night, in the morning his head is shaved clean together with his ritual wife. The wife is also given mwambo.⁵⁰ When this is finished he is first washed with his ritual wife - mkazi wolowa naye dzina. After this ritual bath with special mankhwala (medicine) he is brought forward before the whole assembly and made to sit on a chair on the verandah of his house. Beer and food is served to the assembled congregation. Women sing and dance rhythmically to add to the joys of the day. Then in order to invest upon him his political powers, ku-Tambala takes a new black kanzu (cassock) and puts it on the Bimbi's

shoulder for him to wear it. He also gives him a new piece of black cloth to wrap round his head. The Bimbi takes these and wears them in front of the assembled congregation. Women ululate (kululuta) and dance and small gifts are showered upon the new village headman.⁵¹

A word must be said here about Bimbi's dress. According to Sumani Salimu Chiyaka purely secular headmen are given either a white or red kanzu and other garments but not black. A black kanzu is only given to Bimbi.⁵² The inclusion of the black kanzu here should be understood within the symbolism of garments. The kanzu as a form of a cloak is on one hand the sign of superior dignity and the fact that it is black it emphasises the notion of a veil cutting the Bimbi off from the world.⁵³ It is important to bear in mind that if there is anything which dominates the life and thought of the Bimbi that thing is the black cloth. The black colour in the Bimbi cult seems to be symbol of authority for much of the Bimbi's power appears to be ingrained in the black cloth. Being an insignia of power, the black colour in the form of a black kanzu surrounds the Bimbi with great mystery and ritualism. It elevates him above all other people. All the rituals which precede the installation ceremony are all summed up in the receiving and wearing of the black cloth which emphasises his outsideness, in other words, his otherness and puts him in a special class transcending the ordinary members of his society in spiritual matters.

Having given him his chiefly garments, Bimbi's mbumba are told to respect him, love him and care for him. They are told that if they quarrel they should not take the law in their own hands but that they should go to him to arbitrate between them. They are given mwambo to refrain from excessive anger, because it broods witchcraft, to help one another in times of trouble, to forgive one another and not harbour evil thoughts against one another.

The new village headman is told to be kind and not harsh with his people. He is told to be impartial and not sell his favours for a calabash of beer, for as the elders say mlandu sagula chipanda cha mowa (justice should not be exchanged for a calabash of beer). The new village headman is reminded that his main duty as a village headman is kusunga mbumba (to look after his people) and ensure their well being and continuity. The speeches emphasise the solidarity of the corporate group which must continue in space and time. His mbumba rejoice and say

"We now have a village headman
We are not lost!"

After the speeches the function turns into a big feast and excitement reaches fever pitch. Those who come from far away begin to disperse. When the ceremony is over the new village headman can be said to be duly installed.⁵⁴

To conclude this section it must be stressed again that the installation ceremony is not designed to authenticate Bimbi as a spiritual head. He is called, commissioned and authenticated by the ancestral spirits of the former Bimbis. The installation ceremony authenticates him as a secular village headman and must be taken as such.

How Swāleyi Mkwanda Bimbi was called to Bimbiship

The present Bimbi - Swāleyi Mkwanda - is Timang'amba Bimbi's grandson. His father was Mkwanda. He succeeded his aunt (bambo wake wakazi) Mtsamila II. Both cases were complete departures from the Chewa principles of succession.

We now know for certain that Swāleyi was in the country when Mtsamila II died as against a popularly held view that he was at the time working in the mines

in Zimbabwe. According to this view Swaleyi Mkwanda was still working in Zimbabwe when Mtsamila II died in 1957. He was possessed when he was working in the pit. He came out insane. The same traditions maintain that he left Harare on foot at 4.00pm and reached Ulongwe in Malawi the same day at 6.00pm.⁵⁵ This rather incredible journey on foot from Harare to Ulongwe for two hours seems to discredit this account. If it was actually undertaken the only possible explanation to this is that it was perhaps done in ecstasy like Elijah the prophet who ran before Ahab's chariot the long way from Mount Carmel to Jezrel. The Bible says that "the hand of Yahweh came upon Elijah" which, in the prophetic narratives, is an expression of ecstatic feet.⁵⁶

Swaleyi Mkwanda himself, however, recounted to me that he was, at the time of his call, living in Bimbi village at Kaweya while Mtsamila II was living in Mkwanda village where she died after what appeared to be a state of spirit possession.⁵⁷ Many of my informants assert that Swaleyi did not receive formal training to Bimbishop from Mtsamila. There was not even a build up of expectancy either from the elders of him being the new Bimbi or from the populace at large. In fact according to Grace Useni no one in the area expected that one day Swaleyi Mkwanda would be the new Bimbi. It was other people such as Majawa who were expecting individually that perhaps they could become Bimbi.⁵⁸

We have seen in the previous chapter that Swaleyi went to Zimbabwe in 1944 and returned in 1948. According to his own testimonies, and that of his closest kin, upon his return from Kweke in Zimbabwe, he bought a bicycle and started selling fish at Lirangwe market in Blantyre. He seems to have been both a successful farmer and fishmonger. Swaleyi traces his call to Bimbishop at this point in time. At one of the interviews I had with him he reiterated:

"I succeeded Akumbirika Mtsamila II myself in 1959. It all started when I was selling fish at Lirangwe market in Blantyre. When I was there I landed into trouble [ndinagwa mmavuto]. It was other people who brought me here. When I landed into trouble at Lirangwe I was helped by four other fishmongers who had come from Chirwa. I cannot remember what happened to me after I left selling fish at Lirangwe. Only those people who were with me can be in a position to relate what happened."⁵⁹

During my interviews I failed to trace the four men from Chirwa who helped Swaleyi when he was possessed since he cannot remember them by name. According to the account given to me by Afiki ku-Malekano which, I assume, was told to him by Bimbi himself on the day in which Swaleyi Mkwanda became possessed for the first time:

"Suddenly he had a vision. He saw a naked woman who came straight to him. She bought some fish from him but disappeared immediately. She paid him some money for the fish. She was the spirit of Mtsamila II. After her a naked man appeared on the scene. He too bought some fish from him, paid him some money and disappeared. He was the spirit of Timang'amba Bimbi. It was there and then that Swaleyi lost his senses. He was possessed. The spirits drove him into the bush. He left behind his bicycle, money and fish. It was his friends who wound up his business. He came home on foot and stayed in the village for sometime. He began to eat very little, in fact he used to scatter his food around or placing it at the foot of mango trees saying that he was feeding the ancestral spirits who needed the food as much as he did. He used to talk very little and began to avoid women. We all said this one is going to be the new Bimbi."⁶⁰

Of special interest here is the vision of the naked

woman and man representing Mtsamila II and Timang'amba Bimbi respectively.

Visions, as ecstatic experiences and as mediums of revelation, are commonplace among a number of religions in the world. In James A.H. Murray's A New English Dictionary vision is defined as "something which is apparently seen otherwise than by ordinary sight especially an appearance of a prophetic or mystical character or having the nature of a revelation, supernaturally presented to the mind either in sleep or in an abnormal state of mind."⁶¹

What is important to bear in mind is that this vision marked the beginning of Swaleyi's call to Bimbiship. It is said that he was possessed and lost control of his business and on his return home his behaviour was marked by very strange behaviour akin to those in states of possession. Swaleyi's abnormal behaviour in the village seems to be in line with the idea that abnormal physical and psychical manifestations are by and large regarded as evidence of the presence of the deity or spirit, good or evil, and every word and action of the subject are held to be outside his or her control and to proceed solely from the indwelling power.⁶² Many of my informants who knew Swaleyi before he was possessed unanimously asserted that his possession was real and not a pretence and that his behaviour since then has been rather unique. The belief that supernatural powers, spiritual or divine, may become embodied in man either permanently or temporarily is not, of course, peculiar to the Bimbi cult. It is found at all stages of human development and has a profound effect on the history of religious beliefs.⁶³

After his possession experience Swaleyi left his dengu la nsomba (fish in a basket) and everything at Lirangwe market and went down on foot all the way from Blantyre to Ulongwe. When he arrived at Ulongwe he settled in Mpanga's village, bordering village headman Ligwangwa to the east and Kalimila's village

to the west⁶⁴ where he recovered temporarily. It seems that during this time Swaleyi was not settled at one place but kept on moving between the old Bimbi and Mpanga's village. It was while he was in the old Bimbi village that one day Swaleyi climbed a mkuyu tree (sesamum angolense).⁶⁵ He stayed on the tree for a very short time and came down. Later on he went back to Mpanga's village. One day when Swaleyi was in Mpanga's village he became overpowered by the spirits. He was excessively possessed and consequently ran away into the bush and climbed a njale tree - sterculia appendiculata.⁶⁶ The tree is forty metres high. It seems that originally the tree comprised one stem but now it has proliferated into several ones as time passed by. Akumbirika Mtsamila II is said to have climbed it in 1927.⁶⁷

Jilati biti Nedi of Kamwana village furnishes us with an eyewitness account of what she saw. She has this to say:

"I saw the present Bimbi Swaleyi Mkwanda on the njale tree at the time he became Bimbi. I was living in Kamwana village. From Kamwana village I went to see Swaleyi Mkwanda's mother-in-law near Ligwangwa village to receive from her mankhwala wobelékela [Medicine for child bearing]. At that time I was still young. When I went to the village, to a great surprise of mine, I saw a great commotion of people running to the njale tree. When I asked what was going on, I was told that Swaleyi Mkwanda had become insane and that he had run into the bush and that he had climbed a njale tree. I saw many people running towards that direction. I too went there running. I wanted to see for myself what was happening. There were very many people there from almost all the surrounding villages. It was as if a car accident had taken place for there were many spectators. People were just wondering what was happening to Swaleyi. Many thought he was mad.

When I reached the spot where the tree stood, I saw Swaleyi Mkwanda already on the tree high up. It was frightening and no one expected that Swaleyi could be in his right mind again. He was holding himself tight on the tree between two branches. I never saw him climbing up and down. When he was on the tree he was not saying anything or shouting. He was very quiet but holding himself tight to the branch. At the time he was wearing a pair of trousers but he was not wearing a shirt. He was not foaming or doing anything. He made an awful sight. Many people were crying. I too was crying. I was crying because when I saw him on the tree I was overpowered by great grief 'ligongo chaliji mpela chiwa [because it was death-like].

I do remember that his wife stood at a distance perplexed with a sad face. I did not know what to do at the moment. I left the place before he came down from the tree. I do not know for how long he stayed on the tree but I heard that he stayed there that day and came down at night. From the tree he went to his house. During the night of the same day ku-Tambala, che Mposa, che Kasenjera and che ku-Maninji went about telling people to come to the village where Mkwanda was. On that day in order to show that he was Bimbi he mentioned the names of the ancestral spirits. He mentioned the dates of the first rains but he warned people not to plant. He mentioned the date of good rain and for people to plant."⁶⁸

We now have a fair picture of what actually happened when Swaleyi Mkwanda was called to Bimbiship although there are big gaps of major events and ceremonies which might have taken place. According to Abasi Tambala, when Mkwanda climbed the njale tree the former ku-Malekano, who had served under three Bimbis including the present one before he died, went to report immediately to che Masiwire, the former ku-Tambala. Che Masiwire in turn sent a word to Swaleyi asking him to come down and go to a house.⁶⁹ It is not known for certain how long he stayed on the tree. But

according to Alexander Manjaule, Swaleyi stayed on the tree for the whole night and came down the following day in front of many people.⁷⁰ Nandumbo Kasira, however, alleges that Swaleyi stayed on the tree for three days.⁷¹ Some of the elders who go to Bimbi for milawe went to see him there. These village headmen comprised Mmaniwa, Mkanda, Mposa, abiti Chilembwe, che Majawa, che Kamwanawe and che Kasenjera. Nandumbo goes further to indicate that when these village headmen reached there they clapped their hands and asked Swaleyi Mkwanda why he climbed the tree. It was while on the tree that Swaleyi mentioned the names of the old spirits namely Mkulukutwa, Sokopic, Sakasaka, Kapendeka, Mtangaluwembe, Nyangu, and Mtsamila.⁷² While Swaleyi was still on the tree ku-Tambala sent che Mposa to report to Group Village Headman Nandumbo about this. Word was also sent to village headman Msungu to inform chief Liwonde about this. Then ku-Tambala, che Mposa and Nandumbo Kasira went to tell chief Kalembo about the occurrence. When they reached at Kalembo's che Mposa told chief Kalembo saying: "We now have a new Bimbi. He is not yet in the village but still in the bush." Kalembo said: "Yes, I have heard about it." He did not take action. Nandumbo too did not go to see what was happening for himself. He left the matters in the hands of the Nyanja themselves.⁷³

There has been no indication from my informants that from the njale tree Swaleyi went to plunge himself in the waters of the Shire near the Shrine. Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka, alleges that from the tree Swaleyi went to one of the houses at Mponda-wa-Bimbi which was one of the oldest Bimbi villages.⁷⁴ Abasi Tambala, however, has it that Swaleyi, in fact entered into one of the houses in Kalimira village and started kubwebweta (rave).⁷⁵

When he went inside the house so the story goes, che ku-Tambala and many of the Chewa village headmen went there for milawe. A dialogue then

developed between che ku-Tambala and Swaleyi:

Ku-Tambala	"Who are you?"
Swaleyi Mkwanda	"I have come. I am Mkulukutwa. I have come (kudzamveka ameneyu uBimbi) to invest upon this one the Bimbiship.
Ku-Tambala	"If this one who is inside is Bimbi what will happen this year?"
Swaleyi	This year there will be too much rain. Repair all the rain shrines. All people should make some beer for <u>msunje</u> [offering]. ⁷⁶

According to Abasi Tambala Mkwanda's prophecy became true. There were floods everywhere and Abasi ku-Tambala's own house was flooded. With the coming of the floods people began to quarrel because of land for growing rice and many such cases reached even the Paramount Chief - Kalembo.⁷⁷

After three days of seclusion in the house Swaleyi Mkwanda's mbumba came to take him back to Bimbi village. He stayed in the village until formal installation of his village headmanship as described above took place.⁷⁸ This ceremony sealed his recognition as village headman and his status as Bimbi was fully established.

Succession disputes after installation

It would be fallacious to imagine that the Bimbiship is absolutely immune of any conflict in terms of succession. Such conflict does exist and there are indications that they were even intense during the time of Mtsamila II. Since those conflicting events surrounding Msamila II's Bimbiship will be discussed later,⁷⁹ in this section particular attention will be paid to discussing succession disputes within the present Bimbiship.

It must be stressed here as the subtitle indicates that actual disputes concerning succession have been of a different nature when compared to those endemic in secular headmanships or chieftaincies among the Chewa. In the case of the Bimbi cult disputes to succession have been not so much on the spiritual side of the incumbent but on the secular powers he wields together with his spiritual command. Since the first precedes the latter there appears to have been no time when succession to Bimbiship has been hampered as a result of quarrels between rivals to that holy office. So far there have been no chibwana (a caretaker) in the Bimbiship as is the case, say in the ku-Tambalaship.⁸⁰ During my field work I did not come across any references of conflict among different claimants to the office of Bimbi as a spiritual office which led to the temporary dissolution of Bimbiship or undecided long periods of selecting a person to Bimbiship. References to disputes in terms of succession are more often than not post-installation in nature and easily dealt with since, as it has been pointed out before, the spirits of Bimbiship are the decisive factors in the systematic process to that position.

During the period between the deceased Bimbi and another Bimbi, people do not go to consult anyone on matters of rain. People follow the customs of offering beer for rain as it was directed to them by the former Bimbi. For the sake of proper organisation when offerings are made it is ku-Tambala who acts as head. For instance it is said that when Mtsamila died in 1957 almost three years elapsed without Bimbi. During this time there was no good rain. People went to see ku-Tambala to ask what they should do. Ku-Tambala in turn went to see paramount chief Kalembo to remind him that there was no Bimbi. Kalembo, then told ku-Tambala to do something about the situation since as a Nyanja he would be in a position to do what the Nyanja would do when there is drought and there is no

Bimbi. Thereupon ku-Tambala ordered that msunje be offered at the shrines.⁸¹ It must be noted that ku-Tambala cannot diagnose the causes of a drought, he can only send a word to his fellow Chewa heads holding shrines to make offerings at their shrines as is the custom among the Chewa when a drought occurs.

The most remembered succession dispute is that between Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi and Majawa. According to Mpango wadi Msilo, Majawa's household would have been one of the ruling houses in the Bimbi village as far as secular village headmanship was concerned. Traditionally when the Bimbis become Bimbi they delegate their secular powers to a person of their choice at their discretion to act on his or her behalf. When Swaleyi became Bimbi he decided to invest his secular powers upon his nephew ku-Malekano of the junior breast (wa bele laling'ono) and not to a member of Majawa's senior breast (we bele lalikulu) within the Bimbi lineage.

Because of this Majawa's son called Justice tied the rain.⁸² Justice demanded that he should be given the village headmanship. He complained that the village headmanship belonged to him and not to Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi. He said that Swaleyi Mkwanda had already been given spiritual power by Chauta. He felt that it was wrong to wield in one hand both spiritual and secular powers. He reiterated that the former Bimbis had delegated their chiefly powers to others and that they themselves only exercised spiritual power. On principles of succession, he argued that it was his time to hold the powers of administering the village and looking after the political interests of the people in the village.⁸³

The following account recounted to me by Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi himself reveals the nature of this dispute. One morning as we sat at table for breakfast, Swaleyi, referring to how much some of his relatives covet his office, said to me without being asked:

"In 1964 I faced many hardships which are difficult to recount. One morning I woke up and sat few yards away from my house. Abiti Swaleyi and abiti Suwedi were sitting with me playing. My senior wife abiti Mndala was a distance away in the garden harvesting maize. It was 8.00am and by then a number of people were already on the road going out fishing and for a number of other jobs. Suddenly I saw something moving towards me. It was a lion. It was huge and fearful. I quickly moved away a few yards and decided to take a close look at what was happening.

The lion advanced towards me ready to jump on me at any time. Its teeth and claws were all out. It started moving its tail and making a terrible roar to frighten me. I did not move an inch and kept gazing at it with all the courage I could gather. My two daughters abiti Swaleyi and abiti Suwedi were five and seven years of age respectively. They clung to me screaming as much as they could.

The lion made a terrible scene scratching the ground and opening its mouth very wide. Its eyes were as hot as fire. I have never seen such a terrible creature before. Anyone you ask about this will be my witness. People around were so frightened that they never dared to come near. They urged me to run away with the children. But I did not move an inch.

At last I decided that something must be done for I knew that this was not an ordinary lion but someone had actually sent it in order to kill me because of the name Bimbi which I assumed. A number of people had previously pretended to be Bimbi but they were found out to be cheating so they failed utterly. Thus when I became Bimbi they were not happy and decided to eliminate me, by all means available.

With this knowledge in mind I moved from where I was and advanced twelve feet close to the lion and spoke thus to it pointing my finger at it:

"I know that you are not an ordinary lion. You have been sent here by someone in order to kill me because I

have assumed the name Bimbi. If this name I have assumed I have usurped it from somebody, by the dictate of the spirits, kill me right here and now and let the man who is contesting with me become Bimbi himself. But if the spirits, of their own accord, have chosen me to be Bimbi, then I command you right now to turn back and go to the man who has sent you hither. Three days hence I will have the pleasure to know the one who sent you and his motives and he will bear the consequences of all this."

"Immediately I said this the lion, as if he understood my words, turned back and applying all the power it could gather dug its claws on the ground and with a big jump disappeared into the bush. My wife abiti Mndala was nearly hit but fell on the ground and escaped. It was a real nightmare. My daughters and myself were all covered with dust but we were safe and sound.

People in the vicinity came to see whether we had been hurt and much to their surprise they found us intact.

After three days I received a summons from Group Village Headman Nandumbo. It was Majawa who had gone to Nandumbo and asked him to summon me to his bwalo, [court] to sort out the succession dispute. Majawa claimed that the Bimbiship was his. I, on my side, invited ku-Kasenjera, ku-Tambala and some of my aiders. When we arrived at Nandumbo's bwalo and the question of succession was tabled, I walked out because I thought I was being diminished. Group Village Headman Nandumbo too was embarrassed that I should appear before his court. It was then decided that the case be resolved in my own village.

On the appointed day many people came. Among those present were Majawa, Chiyaka, Tambala and Nandumbo. When Nandumbo bade us to speak, Majawa stood up advanced towards me and addressed me in these words:

"Thank God you are still alive today. You would have been dead by now. That lion which came to your village was sent by village headman Chiyaka. I had asked him to do so. My plans were to kill you and Chiyaka said he could do the job for me. I have failed. I now declare before those here present that you Swaleyi Mkwanda are

the Bimbi in this area. As from today I drop my claim to Bimbiship and any charges I have made against you. I am sorry."⁸⁵

All those present at the meeting were dumdfounded. They could not believe that what was said was true. I stood up and said:

"It is not me who will decide on this case. It is the ancestral spirits who have been offended for bringing shame upon me. It is up to them to see how to punish the culprit."⁸⁶

The case ended there and then. But after a day, a white strange dog appeared on the scene. It came all the way from Mvera. When it reached Chapola's village it met a man going down to a lake. It bit him. By the time the man reached the lakeshore he fell sick and died the same day. From Chapola's village the dog came to my village and went round the village calling on at each and every house. It avoided my house and just passed by. No harm was caused. We were all wondering what a strange dog this was. Village Headman Chiyaka had a goat. That very morning he had tied the goat on to a tree near his house.

Our case had been resolved on a Monday. It was on Wednesday of the same week that this strange dog appeared. The dog went straight for the goat and bit it. The noise of the goat and the dog attracted village headman Chiyaka who was in his house. He came out to check what was happening outside. When the dog saw him, it abandoned attacking the goat and jumped on to Chiyaka seizing him by the hand. It bit him several times so much that Chiyaka screamed and fell to the ground. People from the surrounding huts came to his rescue but by then the dog had vanished never to be seen again.

The villagers rushed Chiyaka to hospital for treatment after they had cleaned the wound carefully. He stayed in Hospital that Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. He died on Saturday. This was the death he died of. The spirits vindicated me.

Majawa met a similar fate. After two weeks he fell sick and died suddenly within a few days."⁸⁷

It must be clear by now that the question of succession and Bimbi making in the Bimbi cult is very complex. The difficulties to comprehend the system are based on the fact that supernatural forces are involved and this inhibits the observer to unravel some of the myth inherent in the system as we have it today. Another problem lies in the fact that there is almost a blackout of information from informants especially those very close to Bimbi when one tries to dig deeper into the events which surrounded the succession and making of the present Bimbi. That secrecy may be the heart of the success of the Bimbis.

CHAPTER 3STRUCTURE AND POWER IN THE BIMBI CULT

In this chapter attempts will be made to show that the Bimbi cult is highly complex, well defined in terms of its functions and systematically organised. This high degree of organisation, complexity and centralisation makes the Bimbi cult a unique phenomenon in the Upper Shire Valley.

It must be pointed out from the outset that the Bimbi cult, like the Mbona cult in the Lower Shire Valley, is a territorial cult. Matthew Schoffeleers describes territorial cults as those whose constituency is a territorial group identified by common occupation of a particular land area so that membership in such cults is, in the final analysis, a consequence of residence and not kinship or ethnic designation. Besides, territorial cults function for the whole of the community rather than for sections within it and they are profoundly concerned with communal and ecological issues. According to Schoffeleers, characteristic activities of territorial cults include rituals designed to counteract droughts, floods, blights, pests and epidemic diseases inflicting both cattle and man. Added to this, territorial cults function in respect of the well being of the community, its fields, livestock, fishing, hunting and general economic interests. Apart from discharging ritual duties, territorial cults also issue and enforce directives with regard to a community's use of its environment.¹ Schoffeleers has also indicated that territorial cults are also characterised by a network of permanent shrines, by specialised priests and by a seasonal calendar of worship. Theologically they emphasise the creative and directive powers of God rather than of the family and nature spirits which are the focus of village and matrilineage veneration. Furthermore, they contain within themselves the idea of

prophetism - the idea of the authorised spokesman of God, who can demand a return to the old order but who can also announce new commandments.²

During my field work I noted that these elements are inherent in the Bimbi cult in a profound way. For instance, I was able to discern that in geographical and membership terms the Bimbi cult's domain encompasses people from the whole of the Upper Shire Valley. As a matter of fact the cult's influence goes beyond the confines of the Upper Shire to the northern parts of Blantyre and even Chiradzulo districts. People who adhere to the Bimbi cult belong to different administrative units in their respective districts, different ethnic groups, and to different churches. But all of them relate themselves to the Bimbi cult in times of crisis. Their participation in the Bimbi cult thus transcends their traditional and central government administrative units, their faith, their ethnic and family boundaries. In this way the cult serves the economic interests of a far wider area than any other traditional religious institution in the region.

It seems to me that people in the Upper Shire Valley have a strongly shared belief that the Bimbi himself, his cult elders and their rain shrines are able to ensure success in agricultural and fishing activities of the people by preventing droughts, floods, epidemics and creating favourable weather for fishing or warning people of the dangers of going to the high waters of the lake. It appears that it is this shared territorial belief, the interlocal nature of participation in the rituals performed in the Bimbi cult, the ecological nature of its concerns and the presence of Bimbi rain shrines which make the Bimbi cult truly territorial.

Structurally the Bimbi cult has three forms of structural organisation, namely the religious organisation, shrine organisation and political organisation. Further investigation seems to reveal that these three

structures, can, in fact, be analysed in terms of a binary structure by grouping the specifically religious elements together on the one hand and the specifically political elements on the other. What emerges out of this classification is that we begin to see that the Bimbi's legitimacy is based on a dual authority - religious and political.

At the specifically religious level the primary function of the incumbent, his cult elders and the rain shrines is to act as media of religious expression of the cult among the people. While the prophet himself is the guiding principle of the work and role of the cult, the cult leaders represent the Bimbi's religious interests by divulging his teaching and beliefs to the wider world. The shrines serve as forums where myths of the cult, its history and rituals are dramatised in a concrete form thus making the cult's impact felt even today. The religious dimension of the Bimbi cult can hardly be disputed. Its injunctions and exhortations at milawe ceremonies which are authoritatively moralistic and the religious content of the offerings made for rain and the prayers said and the songs sung at such occasions are expressive of a cult which places the High God at the central position of its religious activities and considers him as the ultimate moral force and the supreme guiding principle of the universe.

At the specifically political level there are emissaries who serve as go-betweens to the Bimbi as the leader of the cult and Yao paramount chiefs. This is because the Bimbi cult has, in all aspects, a political dimension. As Schoffeleers has indicated ecological and societal functions of territorial cults border on or overlap with functions usually associated with political institutions.³ The political nature of the Bimbi cult lies in the fact that it represents, basically, the Chewa as a territorial and political group.

Having said all this it is essential that we

examine each of the three components which form the basis of the Bimbi cult for it is only on the basis of these that we can begin to talk of the cult encompassing a wider region. It appears that in the study of the religious organisation of the Bimbi cult we are, interestingly enough, dealing with a modern-like form of religious organisation. Thomas F. Odea, for instance, has indicated that specifically religious organisations emerge as a result of the increasing division of labour and specificity of function. At this stage of societal development organisations which meet adaptive needs tend to be separated from those which provide an outlet for expressive needs.⁴ The Bimbi cult must be viewed with this last point in mind.

a The religious organisation

Matthew Schoffeleers in his study of the Mbona cult among the Chewa of the Lower Shire Valley noted that there were two levels of organisation, one dominated by the medium himself and another dominated by the political heads, more precisely the Lundu chieftaincy seen as the conqueror. In the first instance the medium himself is a source of authority and power. He is not officially appointed and in theory, according to Schoffeleers, at least any person can claim that position. Whether or not such claim will be recognised depends on the amount of popular support that she or he can muster. Schoffeleers adds that it is only when this support is sufficiently strong will a medium be able to pit his authority against that of the chiefs and does he stand a chance of being obeyed.⁵

My own study of the Bimbi cult which claims some affinity with the Mbona cult showed that there are a number of fundamental differences between them. To start with unlike the Mbona where the spirit medium, for all his influence and importance, has no knowledge of or interest in the history of the cult because he is

an immigrant, the Bimbi is very much a historian. As a cult figure of high repute he is a member of an autochthonous group - the Chewa - who trace their descent to the Lady Paramount chief Nyangu. Bimbi's religious authority, therefore, is based first and foremost on the basis of his claim of being a descendant of the Chewa ancestral spirits who first turned a land only good for animal habitation to an agricultural land good for a settled human life. But apart from this unlike the Mbona where the medium's authority is dependent on an unorganised popular support, the Bimbi's authority and power are based on a well organised popular support mobilised by his cult elders known as akulu-akulu ampingo. The Bimbi's legitimacy to speak with authority and the high degree of being recognised by the body politic in the region is based not on threats or rumours but on the strength of his cult leaders who organise the masses for offerings at the rain shrines when real meteorological crises occur. These cult officials bear specific functions and hold their offices not by virtue of formal education or training but on hereditary grounds by virtue of birth in a particular Chewa lineage.

The Maninji House

The second powerful officer in the Bimbi cult immediately below Bimbi himself is ku-Maninji whose principal duty is to provide a spirit wife to Bimbi for ritual purposes. The present holder of that title is John Manuel ku-Maninji. He is the son of biti Mwālimu and lives five miles east of the present Bimbi village along the Shire River. John Manuel ku-Maninji heads a very important Chewa village headmanship because of the position he holds in the Bimbi hierarchical structure. He is a key figure in ensuring the success of rituals for rain.

When Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi was confirmed in the

office of Bimbishop in 1959, the elders of the Bimbi cult, in keeping with the traditions of the land, gave him Alusi biti Imani in marriage. She is John Manuel ku-Maninji's sister. She became his spirit wife. According to Swāleyi Mkwanda if this measure had not been taken there could have been disastrous meteorological consequences on the land. There could have been severe recurrent droughts and severe famines. The Bimbi and his elders strongly believe that the land could have been rendered sterile and many people would die of hunger. It is this ritual marriage, so it is believed, which prevents such a catastrophic situation to happen.⁶

Apparently this belief is not a case in isolation. It seems to be commonplace among agricultural societies in which fertility of the land is the focal point in the peoples' lives. In its world perspective, S.A. Herbert, for instance, has indicated that fertility cults in which marriage of divine lovers is part of the religious system were widespread in Western Asia in ancient times and were popular in Graeco-Roman world. Such fertility cults involved a representation of the divine lovers and a sacred marriage. The purpose, so Herbert says, was to promote the fertility of the flocks.⁷

In the Central African context the concept of the spirit wife is not uncommon. W.H.J. Rangeley in his analysis of the Makewana religious institution has pointed out that the personal attendants of Makewana known as matsano which is interpreted as "the spirits of the grave-yard" were also known as Akazi a Chauta (the wives of God).⁸ They were expected to live in celibacy and set apart for the cult of the godhead.⁹ Schoffeleers has also indicated that the essential feature of the Mbona cult consists of providing Mbona with a spirit wife.¹⁰ H.L. Vail has it that among the Southern Tumbuka, Chikang'ombe, the intermediary spirit, was conceived of as a male force

who was married to women on earth who were consecrated to his service and whom he visited from time to time, travelling from place to place on the winds that the people believed were associated with the rains. Such a wife, for Chikang'ombe, for instance, is said to have existed at Zambwe in the Muchinga Mountains of Eastern Zambia and that he visited that place when strong winds blew towards it.¹¹

Since the marriage was effected between Swaleyi Mkwanda and Alusi biti Imani more than twenty years ago a father-in-law relationship developed between Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi and John Manuel ku-Maninji characterised by a continuous avoidance relationship. As in the son-in-law and mother-in-law relationship among the Chewa at the beginning of one's marriage, Bimbi and ku-Maninji do not look each other in the face. As a matter of fact they are not supposed to come near each other¹² although, if Chewa principles of marriage were to apply, they are but brother-in-laws. My informants were not able to explain why this is so.

Though we do not know the exact nature of the marital relationship between the present Bimbi and Alusi biti Imani, his 'spirit wife', we do know from other sources and by observation that they lead a normal family life. Abiti Imani looks after her family of four children in a way that any other mother would look after her own family. Her duties range from domestic activities of rearing her children to farming in her own garden to raise both food and money for her family. But over and above this abiti Imani is at the centre of ritual activities. Her house which looks as ordinary as any other in the vicinity is, in fact, the mother shrine of the Bimbi cult. She is in a sense the guardian of the shrine. When milawe is about to take place, she is responsible for extinguishing fire in the house and for removing any sharp instruments which may cause harm to Bimbi in his state of spirit possession. At the end of milawe she also provides Bimbi with a

ritual bath.¹³

The relationship between Bimbi and ku-Maninji houses, though one of avoidance is thus complementary. The Bimbis are only effective in their duties as rain-callers only when this symbolic and sometimes real marriage between the two houses has taken place. It is important to bear in mind that even when a Bimbi is female this marriage arrangement still comes into force, for as in the case of Makewanaship, Bimbi might as well be thought of as asexual.

The beginnings of the ku-Maninji house as wife-giver are rather obscure. According to oral traditions recounted to me by John Manuel ku-Maninji and other informants, the ku-Maninji house is said to have been one of the earliest Chewa families of the Phiri clan to colonise the Ulongwe area and its adjacent areas. In the olden times ku-Maninji is said to have been senior to a number of other Phiri royals from whom he received tributes in terms of elephant tusks.¹⁴ However, the present ku-Maninji fails to account how the afinal relationship between his house and the Bimbi family came into being. Ku-Maninji's lack of the historical interpretation of this relationship tends to render Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi's account the most feasible one.

According to Bimbi oral accounts, the ku-Maninji house came from Mtengula near Msumba on the Eastern side of Lake Malawi in what is today Mozambique. That they were Chewa of the Phiri clan is not disputed. What is alleged, however, is that upon their return into the Malawi region from the north they found the Bimbis already established as a ruling house and a leading house among Phiri royals.

During their migrations back into the Malawi area they are said to have been led by Chitambo. Chitambo's first sister was Kongoninkhondo. Traditions further maintain that once they entered Malawi they settled at Masanje where Kongoninkhondo was given in

marriage to Kuilinga. Out of this wedlock a son was born. His name was Pagala. For unexplained reasons Pagala became the first Maninji. After sometime Maninji and his group crossed the Shire to the West in what was Mtsamila I's land. Kapendeka living along the western bank of the Shire introduced the Maninji group to Mtsamila and his councillors then living at Majengo. Maninji asked Mtsamila to give him a piece of land to settle down his mbumba.

At the time the practice of providing a spirit wife at Mtsamila's shrine was very much in force. Bimbi oral accounts further indicate that up to that time it was the house of Mchidesa-Mwakachowa, Masache, Chipojola, and Akusala-Mkuti who were responsible for providing spirit wives at the shrine. It is not clear from the existing data whether these houses were of the Phiri clan or other clans.

Mtsamila told Maninji that he would give him land of his own in exchange for daughters from his family as spirit wives at the shrine in the Mponda-wa-Bimbi forest. The deal was accepted by Maninji whereupon he ordered Magombe his young "brother" to hand over to Mtsamila I one of his daughters to be a spirit wife. In this way Pagala, the first Maninji, entered into a father-in-law relationship with Mtsamila I, a relationship which as persisted to the present day. Bimbi reckons that there have been four ku-Maninjis since the system began namely: Pagala, Thunthudwa, Kanyelenyele and John Manuel.¹⁵

The Kumalekano house

It seems to be a common phenomenon that in ecstatic religions there is, quite often, an interpreter who, in most cases, assumes a crucial role sometimes more important than that of the charismatic leader himself. In the Bimbi cult this role is played by the members of the ku-Malekano house. Unlike other offices

one becomes ku-Malekano after what seems to be an "ordination service" presided by the Bimbi himself.

The present holder of that title is Afiki ku-Malekano. He is Bimbi's nephew. He is the son of Mdapitisa and grandson of Ulaya. Malekano claims that his mother is Swaleyi Mkwanda's sister although she was from a different father.

By most accounts the name ku-Malekano is a Chewa name and it means "the crossroad". Traditions are silent as to the circumstances which led to the formation of this as a family name. My informants speculated that the name ku-Malekano may be intended to mean "kulekana kwa a Nyanja" that is "the separation of the Nyanja", when the Yao invaders came for the Chewa were scattered here and there.¹⁶

Afiki was made ku-Malekano at the age of forty. His own testimony at an interview I had with him has it that when his uncle the former ku-Malekano died Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi summoned all the village headmen in the neighbourhood to Bimbi village. Then they took Afiki to the shrine in the Mponda forest. Once there Swaleyi made Afiki stand before the assembly of the village headmen. And there in full view of everybody Swaleyi told Afiki that since the old ku-Malekano was now dead he was the right heir to that position to make offerings at Mponda and assist him at milawe ceremonies. Having said this Swaleyi took a piece of black cloth and wrapped it round Afiki's head saying:

"You are now che-ku-Malekano. You are the priest (wansembe) to pray and make offerings for rain. You should not be angry when people talk about you in the villages. Because now you are holding the land. If you are angry the whole world will be angry and the ancestral spirits will be angry too. The people are going to suffer because of your anger. You are now che ku-Malekano. You are now the guardian of this land and of the shrine at Mponda."¹⁷

When this ceremony was over Afiki ku-Malekano was taken back to the village a new man with a new name and a new task. Afiki claims that he has never been to school. He speaks Chichewa and Yao. His principal duty is to introduce people to Bimbi when milawe is being held.¹⁸ This action is called kupelekela mau kwa a Bimbi (to send word in to Bimbi). Ku-Malekano is the officer through whom the Bimbi and the consultants are able to communicate. Without ku-Malekano no milawe can take place. When Afiki ku-Malekano is prevented to attend milawe he is assisted by Kambani White. My informants told me that Afiki ku-Malekano's role is a very important one. He serves as a medium between the Bimbi on the one hand and the people on the other. Since during milawe Bimbi becomes as it were a spirit (mzimu) he is not supposed to be seen by the people which in fact is the case at this occasion. In addition to this as mzimu (spirit) he cannot speak to the people directly but through a medium who is familiar with the language of men and of the spirits. This is what ku-Malekano is expected to do, to interpret to the people words from Bimbi as from the spirits and also from the people to Bimbi.

The Akuchilunda house

The third important house in the Bimbi cult is that of Akuchilunda also known as Msungu. The present Akuchilunda is Idilisa Ajitu. He was born some fifty years ago in Saidi Msungu village. Following the traditions of Akuchilunda house, Idilisa Ajitu occupies a very important position in Bimbi religious organisation. According to his own testimony and that of Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, when people come to Bimbi for milawe, Msungu is required to be there. If he is not there Bimbi cannot enclose himself and begin to kubwebwetera za mvula (to make prophecies about the state of rain). It is only when Msungu is present that

Bimbi begins to hold milawe.¹⁹

Again when the rain shrine in the Mponda forest is in need of repair or to be built anew, Bimbi sends for Msungu to come and supervise the building work. He organises people for the work and sees to it that it has been done. In some cases if not in most cases, Msungu acts also as a personal councillor and advisor to Bimbi in religious matters. Bimbi refers to Msungu any matters or cases which come to him for arbitration if they affect his work as a religious leader.

Akuchilunda's role as a religious counsellor, shrine keeper, and shrine builder is rooted deep in history. According to Idilisa Ajitu, Akuchilunda assumed such powers after he had been elected by the people to assist Mtsamila I. The first Akuchilunda was Chidanda who also assumed the title Msungu. His main duties were to look after the shrine at Mponda and make sure that it was not burnt by fire. No village headman or chief was ever allowed to go anywhere near the shrine without Akuchilunda's presence. It was Akuchilunda whom Bimbi sent to the shrine to carry out the necessary rituals which Bimbi could not do himself. This included, among other things, the building and repairing of the shrine, food provisions for the spirit wife, and burial of such in the case of death.²⁰

After Akuchilunda was made Bimbi's closest associate a village headmanship was created for him at Mchenga-wa-Wede a few miles away from Bimbi village to enable both Bimbi and Akuchilunda have regular consultations on matters regarding rain. At the eve of the arrival of the Yao in 1860's a new strategy was adopted whereby Msungu was asked to cross the Shire River to the East and set up a village at a place which they named Saidi Msungu. Idilisa Ajitu has it that this was done in order for the Chewa to have dominion on both sides of the Shire and curb the Yao intrusion onto the land.²¹

The Kasenjera house

Another important house in the Bimbi cult is the Kasenjera house now being headed by che Anubi Chipande Chekwenda. He claims that the present Bimbi is his nephew. Many of the functions which were supposed to be carried out by him are now being handled by the Kutambala house. Presently his main duty is limited to making offerings at the Namanje shrine in his own village.

In the past, however, we have a different picture. Traditions maintain that Kasenjera was one of the leading councillors during the time of Mtsamila II. Grace Mary Useni has indicated that in the past when people came for milawe they did not have the ceremony the same day. They had to wait for three or seven days before milawe could take place. In those days when milawe days came and people came as far away as ku-Phimbi and Lundu areas they all reported at Kasenjera village first to seek permission to go to see Bimbi. On no account could they go straight to Bimbi village.

Since people had to wait for long periods in Kasenjera village, it was Kasenjera's duty to give them some hospitality. To this effect booths were built in the village for the visitors sometimes for as many as a hundred people at one rainy season. Kasenjera was responsible for providing such people food and protection. Once satisfied with their requests Kasenjera reported in person to Bimbi. Having informed him of their presence then Bimbi would fix a certain day for milawe.²² As it has already been pointed out these duties have now been invested in the hands of the ku-Tambala house.

The ku-Tambala and Mposa houses

The role played by the ku-Tambala house in the making

of a Bimbi has already been discussed.²³ Suffice it here to say that as Bimbi "makers" the ku-Tambala house has, for sometime now, grown in prominence. The present ku-Tambala is Abasi Lai. He is known as chibwana because he succeeded his father, che Masiwire to ku-Tambalaship. Abasi claims that the present Bimbi is his cross cousin.

One of the principal duties of the ku-Tambala house is to welcome long and short distance consultants in his village and later take them to Bimbi village for milawe. Welcoming people in ku-Tambala village and taking them to Bimbi village is called kuyendetsa milawe (to walk people to milawe). According to Kambani White when delegates come from various areas to consult Bimbi they go first of all to ku-Tambala village. They all first report to ku-Tambala before they take any other step. It is only delegates from chief Liwonde led by Idilisa Ajitu Msungu who do not go to report at ku-Tambala's but go directly to Bimbi village. People from all other areas must report at ku-Tambala's before moving to Bimbi village.

For the sake of swift and smooth administration, ku-Tambala is assisted by che Mposa. The present Mposa is Bauleni Semu. He lives in Ligwanga village. The former Mposa used to live in ku-Tambala village itself. When delegates come to enquire about rain they are first met by Mposa in ku-Tambala village. At this stage che Mposa conducts preliminary enquiries as to the purpose of the consultants' visit and instructs them on how to comport themselves when they arrive in Bimbi village. Meanwhile ku-Tambala reports to Bimbi of the delegates' presence and a day is fixed for milawe.²⁴

The Dete-Kalimbuka houses

Other prominent houses in the Bimbi cult are that of Dete and Kalimbuka the last one also known as ku-Nguzi. Of the two houses it is the Kalimbuka

house which is more active now. According to Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi the principal duty of the Kalimbuka house is to welcome people in the Bimbi village itself when they come for milawe for final briefing.²⁵

It is, for instance, Kalimbuka's responsibility to explain to the consultants the need to observe certain rules which govern the conduct of milawe. These include, among other things, the need not to obstruct the west door, refraining from smoking, lighting fires, and removal of hats, shoes and headgear when approaching the house where milawe takes place. It is Kalimbuka's duty to ensure that these rules are observed.

At the present time because of Kalimbuka's old age this role is played by Kambani White.²⁶

It should be noted that the Kalimbuka house grew in prominence after the death of Dete many years ago. Anubi Chipande Chekwenda has pointed out that in the distant past the Dete house was the traditional house whose duties were to welcome consultants when they came to seek help from Bimbi. It was Dete who led the enquirers to Bimbi at dusk to consult the divine will. When Dete died a long time ago, then the Kalimbuka house took over and functioned as Dete did.²⁷

The Kamtunda house

Lastly but not least Kamtunda is another important figure in the ceremonies carried out by Bimbi. Kamtunda's role consists of sitting at the side of the west door of the house in which milawe takes place and every now and then utter the words PEPA (pardon).²⁸ These words are directed to Bimbi and the ancestral spirits inside the kachisi. He says this word from the time milawe begins to the end of the ceremony at intervals.

The present holder of that title is Laurence Mdala also known as che Sate. He lives in Ligwangwa village. He is the son of Abina biti Namwera the senior

mbumba (sister) in the Bimbi village. Laurence claims that he assumed his post some three years ago when his predecessor was too old to commute between Bimbi village and his wife's village. Whenever milawe is held Laurence Mdala is the first man to arrive at the kachisi-wa-milawe. At one of the interviews I had with him he described his duty as kwapepetsa-a-Bimbi and kwateteza-a-Bimbi that is "to say sorry to Bimbi so that he does not get angry with the wrongs of the people" and "to protect the life of the Bimbi that he should not be overpowered by the ancestral spirits and cause harm to himself in his state of possession."²⁹

Laurence Mdala put it aptly in these words:

"When I say PEPA (pardon) I dress myself to the spirits because at this time Bimbi becomes as if he were one of the spirits and does not know what he is doing as a person. He can hurt himself in anger if the wrongs of the people are too grave to bear."³⁰

Kambani White described Laurence Mdala's role as an intermediary one between the Bimbi and the people. Kambani summed up the situation as follows:

"When we meet at milawe it is like milandu (a civil case) between the spirits with Bimbi inside the kachisi-wa-milawe and those of us outside. The people stand before Bimbi as if they were standing before a judge pleading guilty. Mdala acts as mkhala pakati (advocate or intermediary). Pepaa (pardon) is said to the spirits. It is a plea for forgiveness to the spirits (kumakhala kupepetsa ku midzimu).³¹

b Shrine organisation

Rain shrines (akachisi, p. kachisi, sing, or ku-nsembe - the place of offering) are a major component in the religious organisation of the Bimbi cult.

W.M.J. van Binsbergen in his study of the history and

sociology of the territorial cults in Zambia has distinguished two types of cults namely territorial cults and shrine cults. According to Binsbergen, territorial cults are not necessarily shrine cults.³² It is interesting, however, to note that in the case of the Bimbi cult we have an instance in which the cult embraces both elements within its structural organisation. Binsbergen has also provided us with a definition of a shrine. A shrine is

"an observable object or part of the natural world, clearly localised and normally immobile. It is, moreover, a material focus of religious activities, and perceived and respected as such by participants."³³

Binsbergen has further indicated that while identifiable by locally defined observable features, the essence of the shrine lies in the fact that it refers to non-observable beings or forces. The shrine is a spot which is singled out and treated in a very special way because of its close association with events by which entities believed to exist somewhere outside this visible order can manifest themselves within this order and where, therefore, humans can communicate with these entities.³⁴

From Binsbergen's point of view, it seems, therefore, plausible to assume that shrines are symbols of the divine presence, hence, holy and venerated by the people. J.C. Miller has postulated that among the Mbundu people of Angola symbols were associated with certain powers expressed in terms of supernatural forces lurking somewhere behind the physical object itself.³⁵ One of the effects of this association between symbols and supernatural forces is that symbols produce social action. Groups of people mobilise themselves around them, worship before them, they perform other symbolic activities near them and add symbolic objects to them often making composite shrines to them.³⁶

Turner has observed that in a field context symbols can even be described as forces in that they are determinable influences inclining persons and groups to take action.³⁷ Such action is said to have often some religious outlook since it postulates something beyond the external appearance of the specific events, objects and persons involved. Religious action generated by symbols thus points to a power or powers experienced as supernatural or sacred, powers associated with spiritual beings or Supreme deity.

I.N. Kimambo and C.K. Omari in their study of the development of religious thought and centres of worship among the Pare people of northern-eastern Tanzania, have given us an insight of why shrines have such religious significance in the life of a people. Writing about the Pare they have this to say:

"The development of religious centres on the Pare mountains has been influenced by the need to attain and maintain fellowship with God.... The religious worshipping centres became places where communication between God and the people was possible. By means of prayer supplication and offerings, people were able to establish their broken relationship with God in a corporate form ...

The gap in fellowship between God and man was sealed and narrowed. Thus these worshipping centres became places where God's revelation and omnipresence were experienced."³⁸

The relationship between the Pare people and their mpungi (shrine) seems to be similar to the relationship existing between the Chewa and their kachisi system. The religious significance of the kachisi in the life and thought of the Chewa in the Bimbi cult is indisputable. My informants insistently asserted that the kachisi (shrine) is one of the best means of communication between God on the one hand and the Chewa people on the other. The akachisi (shrines) as sacred symbols of the supernatural, help the Chewa to formulate and awaken

sentiments of dependence on Chauta. Besides, these shrines help them transcend beyond themselves to the spiritual realm of Chauta whom they think governs the destiny of their lives by supplying them with their material and spiritual needs. Added to this is the idea that the shrine system is a medium which helps people realise that they are mere sinners and, therefore, in need for forgiveness.

Rain shrines in the Bimbi cult are thus centres of religious activities. These include not only what the people positively do such as clearing the shrine ground, erecting a shrine, making offerings and prayers but also, out of sheer religious consideration, they refrain from demolishing the shrine, removing sacred objects from it, cutting wood in the sacred grove or even copulating near the shrine.

Having argued that the kachisi system in the Bimbi cult is designed for the worship of Chauta it is important now to move on and see how the system is organised. The first thing to be borne in mind is that the most important element in Bimbi shrine organisation is its high degree of centralisation. Laurence Mdala, one of the Bimbi's leading officers, has indicated that the Chewa make a clear distinction between kachisi-wa-mfumu (the village headman's shrine) and kachisi-wa-mvula (Bimbi rain shrine). According to him, kachisi-wa-mfumu can be owned by a chief or any village headman if he so wishes. The procedure is simple. A chief or village headman selects a tree of his own choice which in his eyes looks dignified enough to have it as a sanctuary. He calls it msoro, that is, a place of prayer. At other times a real msoro tree - pseudolachnostylis maprouneifolia is chosen for this purpose but always by the chief or village headman. Kachisi wa mfumu may also consist of a small hut built over the grave of a deceased chief or village headman and used for family and lineage prayers. Offerings made at the kachisi wa mfumu do not primarily serve an

ecological purpose but rather spring from concern for individual health and ultimately refer not to the land but to the local minimal kin-group under a chief or village headman. When offerings are made the assembly may comprise the officiating elder himself and no-one in attendance or possibly with one or two other people. Occasions such as chinawali (initiation ceremonies), treatment for majini (possession by evil spirits), or when going out on a journey may warrant prayers at the kachisi wa mfumu or mwini mudzi (guardian). At such shrines only the spirits of the family, lineage or tribe are invoked.

The other type of shrine is kachisi-wa-mvula and this differs considerably from the kachisi-wa-mfumu or mwini-mudzi. To start with kachisi-wa-mvula is not owned by anyone who so wishes. It is specifically given by Bimbi himself to specific people, mainly Chewa village headmen by virtue of their being descendants of the Chewa ancestral spirits, but also to some Yao chiefs and Ngoni village headmen as well, depending on their relationship with the cult leader himself. No one can, at will, arrogate a Bimbi rain shrine unless prior authority has been given to him from above. The legitimacy of kachisi-wa-mvula is based on the authority of the Bimbi.

Moreover Bimbi rain shrines are not organised in terms of families or lineages but arranged in terms of groups of villages across kinship, ethnic and religious boundaries within a particular territory under a paramount chief. There is no Bimbi rain shrine belonging to a particular minimal kin-group but a conglomeration of villages which are pulled together to the centre of their religious worship in the village where the shrine happens to be. Prayers invoked at these interlocal rain shrines aim at ensuring the success of the ecological activities such as farming and fishing, activities in which the population in the Upper Shire Valley is constantly engaged. Apart from seeking the

material success of the total community, prayers said at Bimbi rain shrines are ultimately for the moral well being of the population as a whole.

Furthermore those who own rain shrines are required by tradition to renew their spiritual authority from time to time by visiting the mother rain shrine in the Bimbi village at Ulongwe before their shrines become operational.³⁹ Through this process the Bimbi is able to exercise his spiritual authority beyond the boundaries of individual territories and ethnic groups. The circumstances surrounding the activities at Bimbi rain shrines are by and large matters of territorial and regional concern and always consist of religious attempts to counteract droughts, floods, blights, pests and epidemic diseases which may inflict whole populations and animals. What we see here is an expansion of Bimbi religious ideology into a wider area beyond the reach of the territorial chief. Besides, such religious ideology seems to have great impact in society because it promises economic prosperity and both individual and family security.

The Bimbi shrine system has another dimension especially in its relationship with the Chewa village headman. The high degree of centralisation inherent in the Bimbi cult has made it a kind of symbol of unity among the Chewa village headmen and a reminder of their past history. Since many of the prayers said at the rain shrines are expressions of Chewa history they tend to foster a special relationship among the Chewa village headmen and their people who thus maintain special allegiance to the mother shrine at Ulongwe under Bimbi himself. In this way the shrine system enhances Chewa unity and corporate identity based on their common past as expressed in the myths recounted during milawe rituals, prayers and sacrifices offered at the akachisi-wa-mvula (rain shrines).

That shrines are also forums of political expression is not uncommon in religious institutions.

As I.N. Kimanbo and C.K. Omari has indicated whenever the Pare people met together for worship

"they were reminded of their past of which they were participants through the loins of their parents. In this way their past was brought to life; the clan's or lineage's name was popularised among the members and the people themselves felt united as one group with a common purpose."⁴⁰

The heartland of the Bimbi cult

The geographical influence of the Bimbi cult can be divided into two broad sections namely the heartland and the periphery. This division is based on the density of shrines found in one area, the frequency of consultations carried out at the mother shrine and the regularity of offerings made at the rain shrines. In the case of the Bimbi cult the heartland consists of the area within a twelve mile radius within the present Bimbi village at Ulongwe. The only exception to this classification is the Bimbi rain shrine belonging to chief Liwonde which, though is located more than twenty miles away from the Bimbi village, its ritual activities are performed on a regular basis as if it were within the heartland of the Bimbi cult itself and treated as such. Within the heartland the most important shrines of the Bimbi cult are located whose officials consult Bimbi at the beginning of every agricultural season. At these rain shrines offerings are made on a regular basis annually regardless of the weather conditions.

The periphery is the area which lies beyond the heartland, that is, parts of Machinga district, and the outlying districts of Zomba, Mangochi and Blantyre. The periphery is characterised by irregular consultations with Bimbi at the mother shrine, and irregular offerings at the territorial rain shrines. Thus the more one

moves away from the centre to the periphery the less influence and power the Bimbi has. In such circumstances he is approached as a matter of last resort after hope of improved situation has vanished.

An extensive research in the heartland of the Bimbi cult has revealed the depth of the cultural complexity of Chewa religion. There is an amazing systematic and intricate religious organisation. The following accounts of individual shrines is deemed necessary.

But before going further to examine individual rain shrines which I visited during my field work, it is important to point out that these are of different types. Shrines in the Bimbi cult can be grouped in two parts namely man-made shrines and shrines that are not. The first type, as we shall see shortly, consists of hut-like constructions which can accomodate two to three people. Non-man made natural shrines consist mainly of trees located in thickets which are considered holy. Sometimes, however, graves are used as rain shrines but always in association with a proper rain shrine either in the form of a tree or a hut.

The Bimbi mother shrine: The Mponda shrine

The Mponda shrine is, in all respects, the mother shrine from which all other rain shrines derive their spiritual authority and strength. Unlike the Mbona rain shrine whose shrine grounds are considered to be outside the jurisdiction of any secular authority, and they are, therefore, not subject to government rules and regulations concerning land use and its inhabitants do not pay taxes,⁴¹ the Bimbi mother shrine ground is within the government jurisdiction and subject to all government regulations including taxation. The Bimbi himself as village headman is under the jurisdiction of Group village headman Nadumbo Kasira within the paramountcy of chief Kalembo in Machinga district. The Bimbi feels that his participation in traditional

and central government politics is essential and authenticates his claim that he ought to have had a high position in the area such as that of a Traditional Authority, that is a paramount chief, since he is a descendant of Chewa paramount chiefs before the arrival of the Yao.

The Mponda shrine is, in present times, divided in two sections namely kachisi-wa-milawe (shrine for spirit possession by Bimbi himself) and kachisi-wa-mvula (shrine for making offerings for rain). The two shrines are four miles apart. In the distant past the two shrines were in fact one and the same shrine. They were split after the colonial officers had objected to the system of spirit wife for such were confined in Mponda forest for long periods and are said to have died there in seclusion. During my field work however, I was not able to find any evidence of this objection by the colonial officers in the National Archives in Zomba but oral evidence strongly insists that this was the case.

Of the two shrines owned by Bimbi himself it is the Kachisi-wa-milawe which is unique in every aspect. It is located in the Bimbi village itself. It is a permanent building of burnt bricks. It was built in this permanent form by Bimbi assisted by members of his sorority group. This shrine is believed to be haunted by Chewa ancestral spirits especially when milawe is in session. In day-to-day situations there is nothing special or ceremonial about the shrine. It is used as a family house. But during the milawe season it assumes great religious significance. It is to this shrine that village headmen from more than six paramount chiefs come to consult the divine will for pressing economic problems if drought conditions are detected. Consultants who come there represent their people in their group-village-based rain shrines and sometimes they represent the chief himself. It must be borne in mind that kachisi-wa-milawe is only owned by Bimbi himself in his

capacity as chief spirit medium and no one else. During milawe rituals this shrine is entered by Bimbi alone while consultants sit outside.

The second section of the Bimbi mother shrine is called kachisi-wa-mvula. This is a small circular hut three yards high and three yards in diameter. There is a door on it facing northwest through which the officiating elder finds access into the shrine. According to Afiki Kumalekano and Kambani White, the shrine is built by the elders of the cult led by Idilisa Ajitu Msungu on the day when beer offering is fermented (tsiku losinjila chimela).⁴² Kudawe Chiwere has indicated that the elders who are involved in the building of the shrine are required to refrain from sexual intercourse the day before the shrine is built. Each elder taking part in the construction contributes a pole and a small bundle of grass. My informants told me that this is done in order to show that they are one.⁴³

One interesting aspect of the beliefs surrounding this shrine is that it is built for the snake-spirit called Bongwe who is believed to inhabit it. Bongwe is said to be one of the most ancient Chewa ancestors. He was never Bimbi himself but a very important lineage head his position being only second to that of Nyangu. Traditions have it that when he died long long ago he turned into a snake-spirit and has ever since dwelt in the Mponda forest and a hut was built in his honour. Bongwe is said to be a python (nsato) huge, long and black. As a spirit (mzimu) Bongwe is not molested when he is found by people in the forest for to kill him could cause a severe scorching heat and an unprecedented drought, for Bongwe and his council of spirits control the rainfall.⁴⁴

The Bimbi's kachisi-wa-mvula is located in the Mponda forest which is considered holy. The uniqueness of both the shrine and the forest goes far back in history. For instance, one of the foresters in the

colonial administration writing sometime at the beginning of the 20th century about the sanctity of some of the Chewa ritual forests in the Upper Shire reported:

"A feature of the forest in this district are the small patches of primeval forest containing large trees and dense undergrowth ... They are usually burial places and are even now treated with considerable reverence. They are said to be protected by some kind of snake god and in most cases some sort of shrine will still be found. An instance of this is the rain shrine at Bimbi on the Shire 15 miles north of Liwonde."⁴⁵

Since the forest and the shrine are the chief sanctuary of the Bimbi cult, they are surrounded with taboos to protect them from being desecrated. For instance, when approaching the shrine for ritual purposes men are not allowed to wear shirts, hats and shoes. Women are forbidden to wear headgear and they are required to wear chilundu (traditional dress) up to the loins leaving the breasts bare. It appears that when breasts are left so bare at the shrine they are symbols of fertility and they represent symbolically the fertility of the land since at a higher level of abstraction the women themselves can be said to be symbols of the mother earth. The injunction against wearing hats and headgear is based on the belief that if these were worn they could keep the rain away and render the sky cloudless.

Red cloth is also not allowed anywhere near the shrine. The red colour in Bimbi rituals symbolises lightning, therefore dangerous. Expectant mothers and mothers with infants are also not allowed to visit the shrine for reasons which were not explained to me. It may also be of interest to point out that because of the sacred nature of the forest, cutting wood, collecting firewood and removing of plants and other objects from the forest is forbidden by Bimbi and his cult officials. The officiating priest at the Bimbi rain

shrine is Afiki Kumalekano assisted by aBina biti Namwera. They are both Chewa of the Phiri clan.⁴⁶

The Ulongwe rain shrine

Another important shrine in the heartland of the Bimbi cult is the Ulongwe shrine. It is located in the Ulongwe forest half mile away on the western side of Kalembo township. The Ulongwe shrine is a small circular hut built under a mvumo tree (Borassus aethiopum). The shrine is three yards high and three yards in diameter. The roof is covered with a piece of black cloth torn into small pieces to prevent people from stealing it.

Inside the shrine high on the walls two pieces of black cloth cross the interior in the mid-air thus dividing the shrine into four compartments. It was explained to me that the four compartments represent the four corners of the earth and the four winds - mpoto (northern wind), mwela (southern wind), yuma (eastern wind) and zambwe (western wind). When a specific wind is to be invoked during offerings for rain either to stop it or to encourage it, a small hole is made on the floor of the shrine in accordance with the compartments made by the dividing pieces of black cloth above the floor, and the sacrificial beer is poured there with appropriate prayers.

The Ulongwe shrine is popularly known as kachisi-wa-Nyangu (Nyangu's shrine). This is because it is believed that this is the first rain shrine in the region and it was owned by Nyangu herself. Presently the shrine is under the guardianship of village headman Mmaniwa who claims to be a direct descendant of Nyangu lineage. Unlike the shrine in the Mponda forest, the Ulongwe shrine is constantly at the mercy of bush fires. When it is destroyed by fire or has fallen apart because of wind, it is rebuilt on the day when the beer for offering is fermented. The

village which is responsible for the rebuilding of the shrine is that of village headman Mwalero a Yao of the Phiri clan. This provision was made by the paramount chief himself. The present holder of the title Mwalero is Swaleyi Mwalero. He claims that in the past the forest and the shrine were looked after by his father. He was the son of chief ku-Msamala chief Kalembo's nephew. Swaleyi Mwalero claims that he took over from his father the functions of building the shrine when the latter died in 1956. The shrine is built by his men led by one of his councillors. The directive to rebuild the shrine is given by Bimbi at a milawe ceremony and relayed to village headman Mwalero by village headman Mmaniwa.

The officiating minister at the Ulongwe forest is James Petro Mmaniwa. He claims to be Chewa of the Phiri clan. Mmaniwa is assisted by Group village headman Mpango wadi Msilo (Yao) and Group village headman Chimdikiti (Ngoni).⁴⁷

The Chilangwe shrine

The Chilangwe shrine is located in ku-Tambala village. It is named after Chilangwe who is believed to have been the ancestress of the ku-Tambala lineage. My informants told me that the shrine was given to first ku-Tambala village headman by Mtsamila I. It is a huge njale tree (sterculia appendiculata) with a concave shaped base on the eastern side. On this side of the tree a fence is built and covered with a black cloth leaving a small passageway for the officiating elder. Inside the fence at the base of the shrine there are some two old broken pots and an old hollow plate on which the sacrifice is poured.

The priest of the Chilangwe shrine is Chimbaye Juma. He is assisted by his senior sister abiti Juma. Both claim to be Chewa of the Mbewe clan and that they have worked as priest and priestess all their lives.

They acquired their priesthood by inheritance. Both Chimbaye Juma and abiti Juma play complementary roles as priest and priestess. My informants unanimously asserted that ideally the Chewa priesthood is a bisexual system whereby the efficacy and the validity of an offering is based on the successful integration of the male and female images especially when it comes to offerings for rain. A cult leader is normally assisted by his senior sister whose duties consist on preparing the sacrificial beer and pouring the offering at the shrine while the cult leader himself says the appropriate prayers. This, however, is not a hard and fast rule and there are instances when only men are involved. It is assumed that for one to be a priest or priestess one must be a person with a humble heart, patient, good mannered, has good control of sex and does not talk behind other people's backs.⁴⁸

The Kaweya shrine

The Kaweya shrine is located in Kaweya forest six miles north-east of Kalembo township on the road to Mvera harbour. Both the shrine and the forest earned their name from a Chewa village headman whose name was Kaweya. He was the father founder of the Malidade headmanship. According to Yusufu Malidade, the Shrine was given to Kaweya by Timang'amba Bimbi. The first shrine was a mtondo tree (Cordyla Africana). Timang'amba Bimbi is said to have chosen this particular tree because he believed it was inhabited by ancestral spirits.

This first shrine was destroyed by unknown people in 1973. Another tree was selected by the present Bimbi and made into a shrine. It is a mvunguti tree (kigelia aethiopia). The priest at Kaweya shrine is Yusufu Malidade. He is assisted by his senior sister abiti Chaima Asimanye Wandu. They claim to be Chewa of the Mbewe clan.⁴⁹

The Maninji shrine

This shrine is found in Maninji village along the banks of the Shire on the western side of the River. It is sometimes called Kumthirasembe (the place of offering). According to traditions preserved by John Manuel ku-Maninji and Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, the shrine a huge mtondo tree (cordyla Africana) was given to the first ku-Maninji by Mtsamila I. No other ceremonies take place at the shrine except offerings for rain. It may be of interest to note that ku-Maninji himself is not allowed, by Bimbi traditions of chipongozi (father-in-law), to attend a rain offering in person at the shrine. It is a taboo, and it is believed that if he did, it could cause some climatic disturbance. The priest at Maninji shrine is village headman ku-Magombe assisted by his sister. He is a Chewa of the Phiri clan.⁵⁰

The Namanje rain shrine

Another important shrine in the Bimbi heartland is that owned by Kasenjera village. It is called Namanje shrine. Namanje is believed to be the founding ancestor of the Kasenjera lineage. Namanje shrine is a huge mkuyu tree (sesumum angolense). It is believed to be inhabited by a big snake spirit called Namanje. This tree was chosen by Akumbirika Mtsamila II and given to Kasenjera village headman as a place for offering for rain. The officiating elder at Namanje shrine is Anubi Chipande Chekwanda. He is assisted by his sister abiti William and two of his grandchildren Jefule (a boy) and Teresa. They all claim to be Chewa of the Phiri clan.⁵¹

Saidi Msungu shrine

The Saidi Msungu shrine is found five miles east of Mvera harbour on the eastern side of the Shire River.

According to the testimony given to me by Idilisa Ajitu Msungu, the shrine was given to Saidi Msungu by Timang'amba Bimbi. The Msungu rain shrine is a msangu tree (acanthus montanus). In the past a hut was built where the tree stands now. As a matter of fact, it is alleged that the tree itself was one of the poles used in the building of the shrine long time ago.

Idilisa Ajitu explained to me that no other rituals take place at his shrine. It is dedicated for offerings for rain. The officiating elder at the shrine is Idilisa Ajitu Msungu himself assisted by his sister Ajenesyani Msungu.⁵²

The Liwonde shrine

The Liwonde rain shrine is a circular hut of the same size as the other rain shrines described before. It is located in Mbonechela village. It is built under a mtundu tree - Ficus capensis. Around the shrine there is a fence seven yards in diameter. Unlike other shrines where the wall area is covered with grass, the Liwonde shrine has only poles two feet apart supporting the roof. The shrine is built by men from fifteen villages and involving approximately between forty and fifty people. Inside the fence enclosing the shrine there are two old pots with holes on the sides to let the beer escape. They are located four yards away from the shrine and slightly higher in order to let the beer poured on them stream down to the shrine. The offering is not made inside the shrine which is common practice but a distance away. Chief Liwonde who is the officiating elder pours beer into the pots until it overflows towards the shrine and until he is stopped by the people. According to Mwedadi Kananji. Liwonde the first Liwonde to hold a Bimbi rain shrine was Liwonde Kanjerenjere when he was living at Chilanga. Since then the Bimbis have been

giving rain shrines to the Liwonde house.⁵³

Rain shrines in the periphery

The Kunitawa shrine - Kunitawa village

The Kunitawa shrine comprises two trees a mtondo tree - cordyla africana and a mbwemba tree - tamarindus indica. Che Soyaga Kunitawa has indicated that her authority to own a rain shrine was given to her by Bimbi at Ulongwe. The Kunitawa family acquired this authority before they migrated from ku-Tambala village in Machinga to chief Mlumbe in the Zomba area long long ago.

According to village headwoman Kunitawa the first rain shrine had always been a small hut erected along the banks of the Shire a mile away from Kunitawa village. Then a flood came and destroyed everything. Since then the custom of building a hut for a shrine stopped. Things are not elaborate at the shrine. A pot is sunk on the ground at the foot of the mbwemba tree in which the sacrificial beer is poured. Kunitawa does not consult Bimbi regularly but only when there is a severe drought. She last consulted Bimbi in 1983. She is herself the priestess of the shrine. She is Chewa of the Phiri clan.⁵⁴

The Balamanja rain shrine - Balamanja village

Group village headman Balamanja claims that his rain shrine was given to him by Timang'amba Bimbi (Mchinjika). It is located under a mkundi tree - parkia filicoidea. The shrine comprises two tiny huts built two feet away from each other for male ancestral spirits and another for female ancestral spirits. Because of their small size the officiating elder at rain offerings does not go inside the shrine as in the case in the other shrines but remains outside.

Previously the two shrines are said to have represented two Balamanja villages. Each shrine represented a village. Later on the villages were fused. Bimbi advised village headman Balamanja that none of the shrines should be destroyed but that this time one should represent male members and the other shrine to represent the female members of the Balamanja lineage.

The officiating minister at Balamanja rain shrine is Swizan John Balamanja. He claims to be a Chewa of the Mbewe clan.⁵⁵

The Gwaza and Kuchili rain shrines - Gwaza and Kuchili villages

The Gwaza and Kuchili rain shrines are located along the Mavuzi river west of the Blantyre-Salima railway north-west of Gwaza village. The two sister shrines stand three yards apart from each other. They are two circular huts of the same size as those described before in this section. There is a door on each of the shrines. My informant J.N. Chimkango told me that the responsibility of building these shrines rests in the hands of men from Gwaza and Kuchili villages. They are not built annually except if burnt by fire.

Inside each shrine there are sacred vessels ready for use in case of need. These comprise two pots and an old plate. During offerings for rain sweet beer-thobwa - is poured in one of the pots as a gift to the spirits. In the other pot they pour water. My informants told me that the water which they pour in one of the pots is a symbol of rain from heaven and the pot symbolizes the earth. The water in the pot is poured in such a way that it does not fill the pot or overflow it. It must not be too much or too little. This, it is believed, ensures an even supply of rain which is good for the crops. During offerings for rain they also put flour on the plate to indicate to Chauta that they need food.⁵⁶

The Masaula shrine - in Masaula village

The Masaula rain shrine is located in Masaula village half a mile east of Chilipa Anglican Church. It is a small hut and built under a mtondo tree. According to village headman Masaula this shrine was given to his predecessor by one of the Bimbis whom he cannot recall correctly. The building of the shrine is looked upon as a community activity and one which brings the village headmen in the area together every now and then. The following village headmen Matanda, Kalwindiche, Mpepula, Mbukwite, Kapitaapa, Isaac and Salifu are responsible for the building of the shrine. Sexual abstinence is strictly imposed upon the elders chosen to build the shrine in order to ensure its sanctity. Those who ignore this taboo are said to fall into serious trouble. No one is allowed to bring building materials from his house for fear that they may be contaminated.

The officiating elder at the shrine is the village headman himself assisted by his sister. Only flour and water are offered at the shrine and not beer.⁵⁷

The Lundu shrine - Linjidzi village Blantyre

The Lundu shrine is located in Linjidzi in chief Lundu's area - Blantyre. It is variously known as Njowe shrine and Kumthirasembe. According to Charles Lundu, the present Lundu paramount chief, Njowe was the son of the first Lundu. He was valiant in war. He fought all the way down to Masenjele in Chikwawa area. However, on the way back into the Blantyre area he was killed by the Ngoni at Bwakala in the battlefield. He was buried at Linjidzi. The place where he was buried soon became a centre of religious activities. It began to be known as Kumthirasembe (the place of offering).

When there is drought chief Lundu after

consulting Bimbi causes a small hut to be built under a mtundu tree a few yards away from Njowe's grave. The priestess at the shrine is Nalungawe M'berekwa Wanthu, chief Lundu's sister. In the past when offering for rain came flour for the offering came from Mpemba to Linjidzi. Village headman Mawole is responsible for the building of the shrine and looking after it.⁵⁸

The Changamire shrine - Changamire village, Mangochi

Another shrine to examine in this analysis is that of Changamire Mdala. Mdala claims that his shrine came to Mangochi area with his ancestors from Kaphirimtiwa and that it was not given to him by any of the Bimbis. In the early period of his village headmanship he used to build his shrine under a mtunganchira tree a few yards opposite the mosque. Presently, however, the shrine is built quarter a mile away from the mosque under a mtawa tree - (Flacourtia indica).

Although Changamire claims that he did not acquire his rain shrine from Bimbi whom he calls "mphwanga" (nephew) he, nevertheless, sends people to the mother shrine at Bimbi to enquire about rain. He used to send che-Balala who died sometime in 1981. Changamire does not consult Bimbi regularly but only when drought conditions threaten his area. He last consulted Bimbi in 1981. The officiating elder at the shrine is village headman Changamire himself assisted by his sister. He is a Chewa of the Phiri clan.⁵⁹

The Chagunda shrine - Chagunda village

The Chagunda rain shrine, a mvunguti tree - kigelia aethiopia, stands a few yards from village headman Chagunda's house. The village headman himself

is a Ngoni. A pot commonly known as mphika-wa-mvula (a pot for rain calling) is sunk on the ground at the foot of the tree for pouring sacrificial beer. Traditions recounted to me by Francisco Dickson maintain that the shrine was given to Tsamba-Likagwa Chagunda by Akumbirika Mtsamila II. It is said that Tsamba-Likagwa Chagunda a Ngoni village headman and Mtsamila II were great friends. Because of this friendship Mtsamila said to Chagunda: "my friend I give you the authority to own mphika-wa-mvula in your area so that all other village headmen in your area can come to you."

Francisco Dickson reckons that more than three hundred people from Mkaweya, Mizona, Nyanga, Chitalo, Hinda-Hinda, Malirabwana, Milambe and Nazale villages gather round Chagunda shrine for prayers for rain when there is a crisis. Chagunda has it that such large numbers of people come to the shrine because everyone is anxious to get rain and everyone knows that without prayer they will go without food. The priest at the shrine is Francisco Dickson.⁶⁰

The Chiwejere shrine - M'Denga village

The Chiwejere rain shrine is located in Mwima forest in Mdenga village three miles west of Mwima township along the Zomba-Mangochi road. To the west of the Chiwejere shrine stands Msethero Hill while to the east is the Ngonde River. The name of the shrine is derived from a snake-spirit known as Chiwejere and which, is believed, inhabits the shrine. Chiwejere is said to have been once a human being of the Chewa tribe. When he died he turned into a black snake and lived in the Mwima forest.

The actual shrine is a msikidzi tree - trichilia emetica. According to Che-Mbungo the Chiwejere shrine is used only for praying for rain when Bimbi has told them to do so. The chief official at the shrine is Che-Mbungo. He is a Yao of the Phiri clan.⁶¹

The Mpinganjira shrine also known as Makewana shrine -
Mpinganjira village

The Mpinganjira shrine, a small circular hut, is located under a mgoza tree - sterculia africana in Mpinganjira village eight miles south of chief Mponda village. Inside the shrine there are two pots sunk on the floor in which sacrificial beer is poured. There is also a plate on which they put green maize or fresh fish during thanksgiving festivals as an offering to the spirits and sometimes to ask them to give the people more of these good things.

According to Group Village headman Mwalabu Sumani Mpinganjira the responsibility of building the shrine is in the hands of Mtambo, Maputu, Chati and Dauda village headmen. They are all Chewa. The shrine is only very active when a drought occurs at which time Mpinganjira sends Kambewe and Mtambo to Bimbi to enquire about rain.⁶²

The Kumsamala shrine - Msamala village

The Kumsamala shrine is located along the western bank of the Rivi-Rivi River a mile west of chief Msamala village. The site where the shrine stands now is said to have been chosen by Chief Msamala-wa-Chipula. He had friendly relations with Timang'amba Bimbi who, in turn, allowed him to have a rain shrine. To foster the links between the Bimbi lineage and Msamala royal house ku-Phimbi was appointed as go-between the two houses.

The shrine, in its present form, is a small circular hut built with sun dried bricks - zidina. It has a door on the north-eastern side. Inside the shrine a pot is sunk on the floor where beer offerings are poured.

When building the shrine certain rules are observed. For instance those involved are required to wear their shirts inside out. My informants told me

that they do this in order to effect atmospheric changes and induce rain. The roof is covered with black cloth. The priestess at the shrine is che biti Mgalagate assisted by her husband.⁶³

The Mmanga rain shrine - Mmanga village

According to Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi the Mmanga/Tsapa rain shrine is one of the oldest in the Bimbi cult. It was given to them by Bimbi Mchinjika I as he sent them away to colonise the area south of the present Kalembo area. The shrine is built along the Chimwalira River a mile away from the Mmanga village. It is built under a njale tree. The responsibility of building the shrine rests in the hands of men from all the Chewa villages surrounding the Mmanga village.

The priest at the shrine is Douglas Joseph Mmanga assisted by his sister Daina biti Ulaya.⁶⁴

Royal graves

It is important to bear in mind that there is a close association between Bimbi rain shrines and Chewa royal graves which are thought to be sacred. Matthew Schoffeleers has postulated that royal graves have from the very beginning of the Maravi religious system occupied a very important place in the worship of the Chewa. Their cultic places are said to have been royal graves and their main religious function was exercised by a member of the local chiefly lineage who was both a medium and a rain caller. According to Schoffeleers, the unifying factor in the religious organisation of the Maravi was the veneration of a hierarchy of historical personages in the form of deceased rulers and other notable members of the ruling lineages. This spiritual hierarchy culminated in the apical ancestress, Nyangu, and was

duplicated in the ranking of the living chiefs and mediums.⁶⁵

In order to understand the role of royal graves in the religious system of the Chewa and in the Bimbi cult in particular one must understand the position of the Chewa chief in the fabric of the Chewa society. It is also important to understand the Chewa belief of life after death.

The Chewa chief or village headman is a representative of his group. In 'tribal' politics the chief or village headman has legislative, executive, judicial and religious functions. The chief sitting in the council of his elders or village headmen has the power to enforce law and order as well as protect his people from natural disasters such as drought. Social life is organised in such a way that the chief quite often forms the focal point of reference in the peoples' social activities.

The chief or the village headman is, in all practical purposes, a ritual figure since his ancestral spirits are considered as the supernatural guardians of the land and that the survival of the village group or territorial group depends, to a large extent, on his good will. Of special interest is the belief that a chief never dies. He continues to rule his people in this world in the person of his successor. The deceased chief or village headman becomes even more powerful in the spirit world than when he was here on earth and it is believed he continues his ritual role which he exercised while here on earth to ensure the continuity of his social group. Consequently, when the 'tribe' is threatened with natural calamities appeals are made to him as one among many in a long chain of mediums whose position is to intercede to God on behalf of the people.

The position of the dead chief seems, therefore, to be twofold. One phase of his position is that of an intermediary between the ruling chief and his people

and the other and the most important of all is that of mediating between the community headed by the ruling chief and God. The basic belief in all these assumptions is that the deceased chief though physically removed from his relations, he is, however, socially and spiritually linked together with them. The dead chief is constantly interested in the affairs of his people. As a ruler of his lineage and tribe the chief has rights and obligations very much in the same way as when he was living in the body though his role now is far exalted.

Inter-local rain shrines' relationship with the mother shrine at Mponda

It must be obvious by now that the Bimbi shrine at Mponda and the Bimbi himself as a person occupy the apex of the Bimbi cult shrine organisation. The list of rain shrines given above is by no means exhaustive for we know that there are other rain shrines such as those under village headmen ku-Phimbi, Kumchera, Akumbewe, ku-Mlooka, Mposa and others which are as active as those I have described above.

The central feature about all these rain shrines is that in order for them to function as rain shrines they must all relate to the mother shrine at Mponda from which they derive their spiritual authority and from which they renew their spiritual strength from time to time and receive instructions to make offerings in times of droughts or epidemics. This mother-daughter relationship between the inter-local rain shrines and the mother shrine accentuates the central and unprecedented position of the Bimbi and makes him a very powerful and authoritative spiritual figure indeed. His central position is perpetuated by the fact that Bimbi's kachisi-wa-milawe (shrine for spirit possession) cannot be duplicated thus leaving the Bimbi unchallenged in a position which is much coveted by other notables both within his lineage and without.

c Political organisation

Various authorities on territorial cults have indicated that these are, by nature, political. The political nature of the Bimbi cult lies in the fact that it is Chewa in origin and as such it does not draw boundaries between religion and politics. The political organisation of the Bimbi cult leads us logically into the question of the relationship between the cult on the one hand and Yao paramount chiefs on the other. The Bimbi cult operates in a situation in which the Chewa, who consider themselves as autochthonous, have lost much of their power both over their own people and over the land which at first was entirely at their disposal. The present situation is such that in traditional politics it is the Yao who occupy almost all the chieftaincies whereas the Chewa are only represented in village headmanship. The relationship between the Bimbi cult as a Chewa religious institution and the Yao chiefs is thus centred around two main issues. These are: the appropriation and use of land and the Chewa attempt to acquire social and political recognition in the region as "owners of the land".

In the Upper Shire Valley, Bimbi and his cult officials claim that the land was originally theirs and this claim is, apparently, recognised by all Yao paramount chiefs. The legitimacy of their claim is based on the traditions that since they are descendants of the ancestress Nyangu they stand in a special relationship with the land which transcends any other land-charter claim based on military conquests such as that made by the Yao. The plausibility of such a claim is well summed up in Mitchell's words. He writes:

"The owners of the land are usually the earliest known occupiers of the region ... the autochthones who transformed the forest suitable only for animal

habitation into fields suitable for human beings. Under a very general principle this transformation gives them special rights over it so that their ancestors exercise their control over the natural forces that operate it."⁶⁶

The Chewa, in all aspects, look upon themselves as people whose land was alienated from them by their more powerful neighbours - the Yao. In this way it is natural that to a certain extent there seems to be a certain degree of potential conflict between Bimbi cult officials and the Yao chiefs. This potential conflict does sometimes flare up into an actual conflict based on disputes over farming land, village boundaries, allocation of markets, and the extent to which a Chewa village headman can exercise his political power within Yao paramountcy.

But though the Chewa can be said to have relinquished their political claim of the ownership of the land and political power they, nevertheless, continue to exercise their vital role of guardians of the land under the supervision, protection and guidance of Bimbi ancestral spirits. This seems to be in line with Mitchell's proposition that where a system of land holding was disturbed by invasion and conquest in Central Africa, frequently, the original owners have occupied an important ritual position in the territory in relation to their new rulers.⁶⁷ This is the position today of many of the Chewa village headmen who have been absorbed in Yao chieftaincies.

During my field work I noted that there is a strongly shared belief in the region that the productivity of the land and its agricultural prosperity depend, to a large extent, on the Chewa village headmen's ritual role within the Bimbi cult when they act as mediators between their dead ancestors who control the fortunes of the land and the people who live on it and depend for their livelihood on the

ancestors' good will. It is further believed that since the Bimbi cult and its officials are vested with the ritual powers over the productive resources of the land the Yao chiefs can only be assured of good crops for their people in their respective territories when they participate in propitiating Chewa ancestral spirits within the Bimbi cult.

As we shall see later Yao chiefs do consult Bimbi at Ulongwe and participate in the rituals prescribed by him at the inter-local rain shrine. As a matter of fact, it is the paramount chiefs themselves, who through their emissaries, not only initiate and make contacts with Bimbi at their will, but also are responsible for collecting the money which the chiefs use for buying black cloth for milawe and also ensure that maize and other foodstuffs are collected for offerings. In some special cases such as that of chief Liwonde, the chief himself, by virtue of identifying himself with Chewa religious traditions, is the officiating elder during offerings for rain in his chiefdom. As a consequence

"the picture which emerges from this juxtaposition of state and cult ... is that of dual authority structure with king and cult standing to each other in an antagonistic but complementary relationship."⁶⁸

It appears that although it is possible to defy Bimbi on spiritual matters especially in connection with rain, my informants both Yao and Chewa indicated that Yao chiefs do not challenge him openly for fear that he may not ever again listen to their pleas should they be in a real climatic crisis. He can, it is assumed, stop praying for rain altogether and that this could bring disastrous drought conditions to the region. To this effect they are more often than not willing to comply with directives given by Bimbi on matters relating to the proper use of

the environment, human relationships and their relationship with the ancestral spirits of the land and with God. Thus the position of Yao chiefs is expressive of Schoffeleer's view that immigrants are expected to make an act of recognition and submission to the local territorial cult, which means, among other things, that they formally acknowledge common duties in respect of a shared environment. This act of formal recognition is periodically renewed when the members of a community make contributions to the cult, or when they participate in its rituals.⁶⁹

What is of interest to note here is that at this level of interaction the Bimbi, cult like the Mbona cult,

"allows commoners periodically to challenge their rulers and, although the king and the aristocracy play a dominant role in its organization, they are nevertheless responsible to the cult medium on the occasion of major rituals."⁷⁰

It must be borne in mind that the relationship between the Bimbi cult and the Yao chiefs is also dictated by the religious context prevailing in the Upper Shire today. Almost all Yao chiefs are either Muslims or Christians. Their interaction with the Bimbi cult depends to a large extent in the interplay of these world religions over and above the Yao chiefs' political aspirations which in one way or another is seen as being undermined by their dependence on Bimbi land rituals. During my field work I noted that Yao chiefs whose families have been wholly christianised tend to display signs of marginal co-operation and sometimes of no co-operation at all. Yao chiefs who have been wholly islamised can be divided into two groups namely those who show great signs of co-operation, participation and dependence in the rituals prescribed by Bimbi and those who co-operate

on an irregular basis their irregularity being determined by their aspirations to greater spiritual independence from Chewa rituals and also their geographical propinquity to the Bimbi mother shrine.

It may be of interest to note that for the sake of their chiefdoms and their peoples, Yao chiefs have special envoys appointed either by the principal heads of chiefdoms themselves or by Bimbi in order to allow maximum participation in Bimbi agricultural rituals which though overshadowed by Christianity and Islam, still play a vital role in the agricultural life of the people in the area. Having said this it is essential that we now turn to examine how this works in practice in individual chiefdoms.

Liwonde chiefdom

Liwonde chiefdom can be said to be the best example of a chiefdom which has totally assimilated and identified itself with the Bimbi cult to such an extent that it has become a kind of state religion. Mwedadi Kananji Liwonde thinks that his success as paramount chief and the strength of his traditional authority depends largely in his co-operation with Bimbi at Ulongwe whom he sees as enhancing his political power through the ritual powers given to him by Bimbi. Chief Liwonde at Mbonechela, recounted to me that he has had two rain shrines given to him by the present Bimbi since he became Liwonde in 1954. Kananji had it that when Swaleyi Mkwanda became Bimbi in 1959 the first thing he did was to acknowledge chief Liwonde as his protector. To this effect he paid a personal visit to the chief in 1960 during which he granted him a huge mkuyu tree (sesamum angolense) as his rain shrine in order to mark a new beginning in their relationship. Once the mkuyu tree was chosen it became common belief that it was haunted by Chewa ancestral spirits from Lake Malombe who

became, in a sense, chief spiritual guardians of the Liwonde chiefdom over and above the chief's own ancestral spirits.⁷¹

In 1983 the mkuyu shrine tree was invaded by a swarm of bees (njuchi). When Liwonde realised that he could no more make offering there, he sent for Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi to come and select for him another site and another tree shrine. Liwonde could have easily selected a new site and a new tree for a shrine if it were a family or a tribal shrine, but in this case it was impossible because he was dealing with a territorial shrine which could only be granted by Bimbi himself and him alone. Besides, it would have meant the breaking of the long term accord agreed by the two houses. In order to avoid this, Liwonde dispatched Msungu and two other village headmen to ask Bimbi to come and make a personal selection of a shrine for the chief. Mwaadadi Kananji described the circumstances which led to the granting of his new shrine in these words:

"When my former shrine was invaded by bees I called for Bimbi to grant me a new shrine. He came. He began by walking around in the village and then along the road side. He went along the stream looking for an appropriate place. He was together with my son. When they found the place they all came back here. They told me to go with them so that Bimbi could show me the new shrine. We all went there. Bimbi said to me: 'build your shrine here'. Later on I took fourteen village headmen with me to show them the new site. They were all very pleased. They then built a fence around it. I have already made two offerings there."⁷²

Chief Liwonde, in keeping with the tradition of his predecessors, told me that every year when the rainy season draws near he always sends for Idilisa Ajitu Msungu, village headmen Nawanga and Tabu and asks them

to go to Bimbi at Ulongwe to ask him what the chief should expect of the coming rainy season and what he should do in order to ensure a good supply of rain and crop protection from vermin. Village headman Msungu who is always the leader of the delegation is instructed to go and hear yele takatulamule kweleko a Bimbi (what Bimbi is going to command us to do). According to chief Liwonde, Bimbi always gives the following order: 'tell chief Liwonde to prepare malt for beer offering for rain'. Both the date for the commencement for beer making and the day of offering are decided directly by Bimbi himself. If such command has not been given, Liwonde does nothing to the contrary.

Sometimes Liwonde himself pays Bimbi an official visit in order to cement their chiefly and priestly relationship. He recounted the following to me:

"Before the rains come I, myself, sometimes, go to see Bimbi at Ulongwe to ask him what will happen in the coming rainy season. I spend a day or two with him. While there he tells me that when the rains are near I should send to him some village headmen for milawe."73

Chief Liwonde and Bimbi see their relationship as of great political value in traditional terms. Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi pointed out to me that there has never been any other more close co-operation between the Bimbis and any other Yao paramount chiefs than that between Liwonde chiefs and Bimbis in the region. Bimbi himself had this to say:

"When I go to visit chief Liwonde, I go there as if I were going to my own village. We call each other achimwene (brother). When I go to see him in his village, he makes me sit comfortably in his house. Again when chief Liwonde comes here I make

him feel at home. He spends sometime talking to my elders and members of my family here. We are great friends."74

Idilisa Ajitu Msungu, Bimbi's representative in Liwonde chiefdom, indicated to me that there has been no conflict between Bimbi and the ruling Liwonde at any one point of their rule in their respective spheres as priest and chief. According to village headman Msungu if anyone of the village headmen under chief Liwonde shows any sign of dissension, he is reprimanded severely by the chief who sees such action as a move against his own political power. He thinks that he is duty bound by tradition to uphold and defend the Bimbi cult's beliefs and practices because his ancestors did so in the past. To this effect Mwedadi Kananji claims that he is presently training his successor on how to safeguard and defend the Bimbi religious system which his ruling house is required to preserve and stand for. The training of his successor involves in disclosing to the apparent heir what went on in the past between the Liwonde house and the Bimbi family and how to maintain such relationship. The present Liwonde hopes that his successor will maintain the balance of power between the chief as political benefactor of the Bimbi cult while the latter will continue to provide its ritual services to authenticate the chiefdom's spiritual values in relation to the land.⁷⁵

The Kalembo chiefdom

The relationship between chief Kalembo and Bimbi can be said to be one of conflict and co-operation. It is one of conflict especially when the present Bimbi makes political claims denied by both chief Kalembo and his senior headmen. The situation is one of co-operation especially in times of territorial crisis when the chief and the prophet need each other's

co-operation in order to ensure success in rituals needed to redress the situation.

The present representative of chief Kalembo in the affairs of Bimbiship is Mpango Wadi Msilo. He is the son of Awesa bitil Makalani. According to traditions recounted to me by Mpango himself, the first Mpango was Msamala's son. The Msamala family are said to be nephews of the Kalembo family. Wadi Msilo claims that he is chief Kalembo's grandson.

In order to have a strong representation when approaching Bimbi and secure participation in the rituals performed by him and in order to be in line with the people's socio-economic interests, Mpango was appointed as the chief's special representative in these matters.

Thus whenever chief Kalembo wants to communicate with Bimbi on religious matters he acts through Mpango Wadi Msilo to whom he gives instructions to approach "the holy see". Requests and grievances from both sides are made through him. Mpango's primary duty is to organise and mobilise all village headmen at Ulongwe to go to Bimbi for milawe. This is done as a response to a specific request and command from chief Kalembo himself. But the chief's action is by and large a response to popular demands when drought conditions are feared. Besides, Kalembo through Mpango, issue orders to the people to prepare malt and make beer for offerings for rain at the rain shrine in the Ulongwe forest. It must be borne in mind that such orders are given only after a mandate has been issued by Bimbi that such action is necessary in the prevailing circumstances.⁷⁶

There are instances, however, when Kalembo chiefs have tried to challenge such mandates from Bimbi and even attempted to assert their independence by setting up a Bimbi of their own. A conflict of such proportions is said to have erupted during the time of Mtasmila II. According to traditions recounted to me by Kudawe Chiwere, in 1938, Kungwalu, chief Kalembo's

young brother, decided to challenge Mtsamila II's spiritual power and authority in the area in order to enable the Kalembo chieftaincy wield an overall authority in the land. He was expecting to become paramount chief himself. Whereupon he instructed his wife, Lukonji, to behave as if she were possessed by ancestral spirits and claim that she was Mtsamila Lukonji, accordingly, pretended that she was possessed and fasted for many days. Kungwalu claimed to the world that his wife was Bimbi and that people should no longer go to Mtsamila II but should come to his wife to consult her for rain. Kungwalu is said to have demanded also that a shrine be built in her honour for milawe. Kungwalu's claim, however, is said to have utterly failed when his wife failed to avert the drought conditions of 1939. When he and his wife saw that they had no control over the drought gave up their claim and Mtsamila II was once again authenticated in her role as Bimbi.⁷⁷ As we shall later conflicts such as this still exist between Bimbi and the present Kalembo although in a varying degree.⁷⁸

The Mlumbe-Chikowi chiefdoms

In Mlumbe and Chikowi chiefdoms the situation is slightly different. Here we have an indirect form of official representation. The two paramount chiefs are devotees of the Church of Central African Presbyterian locally known as CCAP. Because of this an official representation in their dealings with Bimbi would lead to a head on confrontation with the Church. An appeal from Bimbi in 1984 to chief Mlumbe to revive the old rain shrine at the headquarters is said to have fallen on deaf ears.⁷⁹

But in order to preserve the traditions of the land and in keeping with the economic interests of their subjects at heart Group village headman Balamanja's house was appointed as the chief's

representative. The present Balamanja is Swizan John Kachingwe. He is Chewa of the Mbewe clan. His main duty is to mobilise, on the chief's behalf, all the village headmen in chief Mlumbe's area and to decide on a course of action on the chief's behalf in the face of a severe drought. Normally they decide to send a delegation to Bimbi. Such delegations are led by Balamanja himself or any other member of the community appointed by him.

Balamanja is ultimately responsible to chief Mlumbe to whom he reports on any question relating to Bimbi-Mlumbe relationship. In order to make things easier for Balamanja the area under chief Mlumbe has been sub-divided into three ecclesiastical sections under the following village headmen - Gwaza, Masaula and Balamanja himself.⁸⁰

The Mponda chiefdom

Present day relationship between Bimbi and chief Mponda is a marginal one. There are, however, indications that in the past chief Mponda dealt with Bimbi either in person or sent a delegation to Bimbi appointed by him.⁸¹ In recent times chief Mponda has tended to indirectly use the Mpinganjira family as means of contact with Bimbi. The present holder of the Mpinganjira title is Mwalabu Sumani. He is a Chewa of the Phiri clan. He claims to be a direct descendant of Makewana a religious personage of an older Chewa religious system which flourished at Msinja in Central Malawi.⁸²

According to Mwalabu Mpinganjira his main duties are to consult Bimbi on behalf of chief Mponda and the people in the whole of Mponda chiefdom whenever the region is threatened by a severe drought. The chief uses Mpinganjira's services as a link between himself and Bimbi. Thus Mpinganjira is expected to take the first step in consulting Bimbi and also making

rain offerings at his rain shrine at Mpinganjira village. This is a signal for the chief to make his own offering at his own shrine in his own village.⁸³

The Lundu chiefdom

In chief Lundu's chiefdom at Linjidzi in Blantyre, the Bimbi cult has also a tight grip. Although the present chief Charles Lundu does not consult Bimbi regularly, he appointed the houses of Mawole and Mposa as his envoys to Bimbi. Of these two the more important house is that of Mawole. Charles Lundu has it that the choice fell on Mawole as the chief envoy because he is the chief's nephew. Whenever there is a drought paramount chief Lundu summons village headman Mawole and sends him to Bimbi with a team of people with a message "kunja kuno kwayera tichite bwanji?" (it is dry here what shall we do?). Mawole often brings word back from Bimbi instructing the chief to make prayers and offerings at his rain shrine. Mawole is also responsible for looking after the chief's rain shrine making it accessible for offerings.⁸⁴

The Malemia-Kumtumanji chiefdoms

Working relationships between Malemia and Kumtumanji on the one hand and Bimbi on the other seem to be virtually non-existent. In these two chiefdoms Bimbi was supposed to be represented by Group village headman Arnold Frederick. Arnold claims that he is a Chewa of the Mwale clan and a holder of an older rain shrine which has since fallen into disuse.⁸⁵

During one of my visits to his court he reiterated that in 1983 he tried to reinstate the shrine to its former position but without much success. Very recently Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi paid him an official visit during which he urged him to revive the ritual

activities at the shrine.⁸⁶

It is interesting to note that where Arnold Frederick failed, Chrighton Kuchanga Mpheta also known as Msonga-ya-Udzu succeeded. Group village headman Mpheta is a Chewa of the Phiri clan. The Mpheta house is a staunch supporter of the Bimbi cult and the title holders of Msonga-ya-Udzu headmanship see themselves as Bimbi officers. Strategically positioned on the borderline between Kawinga and Kuntumanji chiefdoms on the Domasi plain, his influence as a religious leader is felt across the Kuntumanji-Malemia borders and beyond. The main duties of Msonga-ya-Udzu are to consult Bimbi in times of drought on behalf of the people on the Domasi Valley as well as to make offerings for rain.⁸⁷

The Msamala chiefdom

In Msamala's chiefdom the chief also has a personal representative in his religious dealings with Bimbi. The Msamala house set up village headman Kalisache as the chief's personal envoy. Kalisache is said to have been given this great responsibility fifteen years ago by chief Msamala-wa-nduwi. Kalisache is also responsible for the building of the chief's rain shrine and mobilising people for milawe. Before him this role was played by ku-Phimbi and later by M'Manga.⁸⁸

It is interesting to note that the relationship between Bimbi and Yao chiefs, as given above, is not profoundly dominated by conflict. Unlike the Mbona spirit medium, who seems to operate within a given cult organisation in which the chiefs appear to play a major role and from whom he derives much of his authority, the Bimbi is an authority in himself derived from being a descendant of Chewa ancestors. As such his success, power and authority do not depend on the support and constitutional arrangements of

chiefs who, in all aspects, are but recent immigrants.

Bimbi is an independent prophetic figure standing both within and yet outside Yao politics. It appears that as an outsider the degree of his success and respect from chiefs is greater, perhaps, than that enjoyed by the Mbona spirit medium, who, it appears, depends to a large extent on the willingness of the chiefs to co-operate at every stage of his mediumship.

It may also be of interest to note that the absence of an explosive conflict in the Bimbi cult between Bimbi and the chiefs, of the nature existing in the Mbona cult, may be due to the nature of the message transmitted by Bimbi. Schoffeleers has noted that the Mbona spirit medium's message is always centrally concerned with the behaviour of the chiefs and the relationship between the chiefs and the people. It is the chiefs who bear the brunt of the medium's criticisms either because they are accused of siding with the central government against the population or because they are accused of failing to put an end to the social abuses within their territories.⁸⁹

My own study of the Bimbi cult has revealed that although Bimbi criticises the behaviour of chiefs and village headmen for social, political, economic and environmental abuses, criticising the chiefs is not his central concern at all. The Bimbi's main concern is a religious one. He is centrally concerned with bringing both chief and commoner to God. Bimbi constantly reminds them of the marvellous power of God in nature and reminds them that they depend on God's benevolence manifested to them in the form of rain which gives life to all.

Bimbi only criticises the chiefs and village headmen in so far as their behaviour obstructs man's communion with God and his fellow man. It seems to me that Bimbi is a proclaimer of a social gosple which emphasises unity, social justice for the weak, peace and harmony among the people. He is not a radical reformer. He is mainly a religious figure with God at the centre of man and the world.

CHAPTER 4

RITUALS PERFORMED BY BIMBI

a Chilewe ritual dance

"The dance is the mother of arts.
 Music and poetry exist in time.
 Painting and architecture in space.
 But the dance lives once in time and
 space. The creator and the thing
 created, the artist and the work are
 still and the same thing. Rhythmical
 patterns of movement, the plastic sense
 of space, the vivid representation of
 a world seen and imagined - these things
 man creates in his own body in the dance
 before he uses substance and stone and
 word to give expression to his inner
 experiences."¹

The impact of the Bimbi cult in the Upper Shire Valley must be attributed to a number of factors. We have already seen in previous chapters that the Bimbi, his cult officials and the rain shrines which are strategically well spread in the region are, among other things, some of the factors which make the cult palpable in the life of ordinary people. But these in themselves, would not have been strong enough to account for the far reaching influence which the Bimbi cult has in the lives of countless peoples in the area.

The Bimbi cult, as a living faith, is directly related to the people in their ecological setting through its rituals, enabling people not only to create a sense of common identity and brotherhood but also to transcend the limitations of their physical existence to the spiritual powers upon whom their lives are believed to be dependent. This seems to be in line with Benjamin Ray's view that the ritual sphere is the sphere par excellence where the world as lived and the world as imagined become fused together and transformed into reality. Through

ritual, man transcends himself and communicates directly with the divine.² In the same vein E.M. Zuesse has indicated that ritual is spiritually more profound than any theology. It accomplishes more for those who participate in it than any number of rarefied mystical treatises.³ Zuesse has it that ritual mediates between real and ideal, flesh and mind, material and spiritual giving each a shape which is that of the other.⁴ Furthermore ritual seeks to integrate humanity and the cosmic forces in an harmonious and fruitful manner, so as to transform and renew the universe.⁵

Rituals performed in the Bimbi cult are thus fundamentally important in that through them the participants not only achieve social and spiritual integration with their fellow members but also affirm before the world their religiosity and allegiance to the cult. These rituals can be classified in two groups namely those in which the prophet himself is the chief actor and those in which the people themselves are the chief actors.

Chilewe ritual dance is an agricultural religious dance in which the Bimbi himself is the chief actor. It is designed to achieve, so it appears, social, political and economic goals. According to Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi he performs the chilewe dance when he suspects that drought conditions are imminent which are reflective of social tensions in the community.⁶ David Scott has suggested that the word chilewe must have derived from the verb (ku) lewa meaning 'to avoid things' such as missiles, arrows and stones, or 'to lean to one side' or 'to go to one side to let anything dangerous pass'.⁷ Chilewe may, therefore, carry the religious meaning of escaping from the wrath of the ancestral spirits and, by extension, of Chauta himself. This dance may be intended to draw people away from those social disorders in the social microcosm which bring adverse

effects in the ecological order. By drawing people together a certain degree of oneness is achieved and social tensions within the community are, at least temporarily, transcended.

The chilewe dance seems to be a regulative institution because it is directed towards creating a balance in a destabilised social situation. It should be emphasised here that concern with a successful agricultural cycle is a great preoccupation of the Bimbi, his officials and the whole population of the Upper Shire Valley. Farming, therefore, is surrounded with religious activities. The chilewe dance which is one of these activities, is a form of prayer to the Almighty God and the ancestral spirits without whom success in crop planting and harvesting is considered to be almost impossible.

Through chilewe ritual dance the people are prepared for the subsequent act in the drama of redressive agricultural rituals which acts as religious counter-measures to drought. It is tempting to argue that chilewe dance, and the Bimbi as a religious dancer, have the effect of 'liberation' or even 'salvation' since they free people from the anxiety due to fears of the unknowable nature of the coming rainy season. It can be said that both the dance and the Bimbi instil a sense of hope to hopeless people by assuring them that the spirits of the land are in control of the cosmic and spiritual forces which control rainfall and agricultural prosperity.

It will be noted that to underline the importance of a successful agricultural season the participants in the chilewe dance are drawn from members of different faiths that is Christians, Muslims and Traditionalists. In a country where writing is of recent history, and where different peoples speak different dialects, the chilewe dance seems to be of great importance in that through the dance people

are able to communicate in the rhythmic movements of their body in a way which would be impossible by using the written or the spoken word. The people who are involved in it have tended to look at it as a sacred act and quite different from other dances possibly because of the high moral goals encapsulated in it. Bimbi himself takes it to be the prerogative of his priestly office to perform the dance and he alone can initiate it and lead people into it. No one among the Bimbi cult leaders has the power to dance chilewe unless the Bimbi himself is performing it at the will of the ancestral spirits. To Bimbi, the chilewe dance is one of the most effective means he can communicate, through what appears to be spirit possession, not only with the supernatural powers but also with the people at large.

In times of drought the chilewe dance marks the beginning of a whole series of agricultural rites designed to regulate meteorological conditions to suit the needs of the people in their economic pursuits. When the chilewe dance is performed, it is believed that it dispels excessive heat and persistent dry conditions which cause fear in the mind of the people and the Bimbi himself.

Since chilewe is performed in times of drought I was not able to observe, during my field work, the way in which this ritual is held because of the absence of a drought at the time, but the information contained in these pages was collected from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi himself, officers closest to him and other informants. Bimbi claims that he has performed the chilewe dance ten times since he became Bimbi, the last one being in 1982.⁸

It should be borne in mind that chilewe is danced during the dry season when seed time is near. Normally it is held in October or at the beginning of November of the year in which Bimbi decides to hold the dance just before the main rains come. There is

an interesting religious factor in the timing of chilewe dance for it is held at the time when the first rains locally known as zimalupsya are expected. Zimalupsya comes from two Chewa words: zima meaning 'to quench' or 'put out' or 'cool down' and even 'to die'⁹ and the word lupsya meaning 'burnt bush'.¹⁰ The image we have is of land which is in a state of intense heat caused by the burning of the grassland. It is customary in the Upper Shire Valley and in Malawi in general to burn the dry grass at the end of July. The fires are largest in September and October. The burning commences from chance fires in the bush, lit by passers-by or the bush is set on fire intentionally for the sake of hunting, herding and farming. The air is quite sultry, and the horizon misty all round the area where the bush fire is burning and a marked difference in temperature is experienced for those who are near. In the act of setting the bush on fire the vegetation is literally put to death in order to enable fresh grass to grow in the place of the old and almost useless grass of the previous year which has outlived its usefulness. Immediately after the heavy fires, often showers of rain come accompanied by dangerous lightning-flashes. These showers are what is called zimalupsya rains because, it is believed, they come to quench out the burning bushes - kuzima lupsya and restore the state of coolness to the soil which is receptive to new life. During the time between the bush fires and the zimalupsya rains, the land looks very bare. It can be said to be in a state of symbolic death and awaiting new life which comes with the zimalupsya rains.

Between the two stages of symbolic 'death' and 'new life' which is analogous to 'resurrection' the land experiences excessive heat hence its need to be cooled down by the effect of the zimalupsya rains in order that new grass, hence new life, may sprout. This

is a crucial transition period from a death-like situation to a life-like situation.

With the coming of the zimalupsya rains it can be said that new life comes into the world after a long period of a long dry weather during which water is scarce in a number of places and life for the following year for people, flocks and crops left at the mercy of cosmic and spiritual forces.

J.M. Schoffeleers has indicated that bush fires in Malawi and the subsequent first rains are generally held to be religious especially so among the Chewa. According to Schoffeleers the religiosity of the bush fires lies in the fact they mark a division between two crucial periods characterised by a cyclic duality - a downward and upward movement in the form of water and fire. Schoffeleers has it that these ideas are deduced from the Chewa creation story which alleges that God, men and animals came down from the sky accompanied by the first rains. Because of the rain the earth which until then had lain barren, sprang to life and man began to cultivate his gardens. In the downward movement, God, possibly with the ancestral spirits included, are seen as bringing with them the rains which cause vegetation to grow on earth while in the upward movement caused by the destructive effects of the bush fires, God returns to the sky (seen in the action of the fires which leap upwards) followed by the spirits of the deceased.¹¹ Schoffeleers has it that this cyclic movement does not end here for:

"The seasons appear as an annual repetition of primary events in which the rains are associated with the descent of the spirits and the fires are regarded as the vehicles of their return ... they come down with the rains, make the crops germinate, grow and mature and when the bush fires flare up, return to the sky where they convert the smoke into rain clouds, thus completing the annual cycle."¹²

This analysis of the religious significance of bush fire is intended here to underline the crucial importance of the chilewe dance, for chilewe is held immediately before the zimalupsya rains when dry-hot conditions seem to be persistent and intensive enough to scare the people and when the sky is stubbornly crystal clear. One of the objectives of the dance, so it appears, is to precipitate the return of the ancestral spirits in the form of zimalupsya rains in order to restore life so much desired by the people.

Village headman Henry Chisinkha has also given us another dimension of the importance of zimalupsya rains. According to him a long time ago rules for making malt for beer for rain making in the Bimbi cult required that only water collected in big pots from zimalupsya rains was acceptable for making maize or sorghum into malt. No other water, say from the lake, river or well could be used for this particular purpose. As a matter of fact chilewe was performed in order to make the rain fall for purposes of collecting the water for malt-making.¹³ In this case the importance and significance of the zimalupsya rains lay in its cooling properties and its ability to bring about new life.

As we shall see later, beer is by and large the most popular food item which is prescribed to those who come to ask Bimbi for madzi (rain-water). Bimbi explained to me that beer cools down the earth and cools down the ancestral spirits who may be in a state of anger.¹⁴ It is also said that at the sociological level beer offering cools down the hearts of groups of people who are drawn together at the offering and who may be rather potentially hostile to one another. Since the state of coolness in the social order is thought to be conducive to the state of coolness in the natural order hence conducive to rainfall, then harmony, concord, and good will in the social order is thought to be essential to induce,

reinforce and perpetuate the state favourable to rainfall.

The chilewe ritual dance is thus performed by Bimbi himself accompanied by his 'followers' when drought conditions are suspected in order to create favourable conditions for milawe and offerings for rain. When Bimbi decides to hold chilewe he first summons his akulu-a-mpingo (cult elders).¹⁵ It is Kumalekano with whom he first confers. After consultations with his elders he announces to them the date on which chilewe is to be held and the villages he intends to visit during the ritual dance, since he cannot cover all the villages because of the geographical size of the area in question. The akulu-a-mpingo then go from one village to another telling people that the Bimbi is about to perform the chilewe dance and that they should be prepared for the ceremony. They tell the people the date on which the ceremony is to be held. The person who is presently responsible for organising the chilewe dance is Kambani White.¹⁶ He ensures that all the necessary arrangements for the ceremony are carried out by meeting village headmen in their respective villages in person.

According to testimonies given by abiti Juma the first announcement about the dance is made at ku-Tambala village,¹⁷ a fact which confirms that ku-Tambala holds a very important position in the Bimbi structure as evidenced in the making of the Bimbi.¹⁸

When all the villagers have been informed about the dance, they get prepared. On the appointed day they open the doors of their houses to enable Bimbi to enter and leave them without let or hindrance. Meanwhile Kambani White gathers all the women in the Bimbi village for the ceremony. They serve in all intents as a choir group which leads other people in song and clapping of hands. Once assembled at the

kachisi-wa-milawe,¹⁹ the women begin to sing songs and clap their hands as they dance around. The drum is sounded and the dance begins. It was pointed out to me that sometimes the drum is not used at all. It is the clapping of hands which in that case dominates the occasion as people sing chilewe songs.

The Bimbi himself wearing his black cassock and his black headgear stands at a distance from the dancing party flanked by his two officials - Kumalekano and Kambani. Gradually the singing, the clapping of hands and the drumming when a drum is used get louder and louder. These begin to have an effect on the Bimbi who with a leap in the air begins to dance until the prophet himself more than anyone else in the dancing party enters into a frenzied mood. At this stage he is said to be possessed by the spirits of the former Bimbis.

Curt Sachs has indicated that in a dance like this normally the dancer is possessed. The person, the animal, the spirits, the god which he represents take control of his body. The dancer, in a sense, becomes the animal, the spirit or the god. He must therefore, act what he has become and he must work, give and bless.²⁰ It seems that one of the functions of chilewe is to enable the prophet to get into the state of spirit possession. It is common belief that music and dancing sometimes are conducive to spirit possession as is the case in the vimbuza or mashawe ritual dance.²¹

In the case of the Bimbi it is believed that his ancestral spirits take hold of him, or more precisely, they take over his body. My informants pointed out that in his state of spirit possession he has no feeling of pain at all and can go on for days without food.²² According to the oral evidence collected at Ulongwe in general and in the Bimbi village in particular, when Bimbi is performing the chilewe dance he does so not according to his own will

but according to the will of the spirits. His actions are said to be controlled by them.

When Bimbi becomes ecstatic, it is said, he jumps around stamping the ground with his feet and striding forth into the fields leading the people from one village to another. At first he moves slowly but then later, it is said, he moves like a whirlwind (chivumbulu) and moves wherever the spirits bade him to go. People run after him.²³ A few things need explaining here before going further. None of my informants gave me a satisfactory answer as to why the prophet stamps the ground. I am, however, tempted to look at this from Sach's interpretation that stamping the ground is a symbolic act of taking possession of the land.²⁴ When the Bimbi stamps the ground in the way he does it may be a re-enactment of the way in which the Chewa people are said to have arrived in the area as rulers and took possession of the land from the autochthones and made it their own. Looked at from this point of view one may conclude that the chilewe dance has political ethos consciously or unconsciously designed to remind people in the area that the Chewa are the traditional owners of the land in the region.

It should also be noted that when the excitement of the dance reaches fever pitch the Bimbi is said to move like a whirlwind (chivumbulu). This seems to be another manifestation of the divine in the actions of the Bimbi which makes people believe that Bimbi is a divine agent, for as Schoffeleers has indicated whirlwinds in Malawi are by and large regarded as theophanies, that is, manifestations of the divine.²⁵

Another important point which needs explanation here is the manner in which the Bimbi leads the dancing party through fields and villages. My informants told me that he strides forth leaping. It leaves no doubt that this is done under the influence of the

ancestral spirits who are said to act through him to bless the fields. The striding or leaping has also been explained by Sachs as typical of fertility dances. In this connection the striding may be intended to symbolise the growth of the crops and that the higher the leaps the taller the crops can be expected to grow.²⁶ Although my informants were not able to explain the intended goal of the Bimbi in his actions by leaping during the dance, I am of the view that the motif of growth is, by implication, present in the prophet's mind.

It has been noted that chilewe dance always begins in the Bimbi village at the kachisi-wa-milawe (outside the shrine where milawe are held). At one of the interviews I had with Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi he had this to say about the way in which the dance begins and the people involved in the ceremony. He said:

"I normally start the dance with a small group of people from my own village but eventually a crowd of people from other villages joins us in their hundreds. When I move from one village to another the people of the next village welcome me with great excitement. Men and women, boys and girls come to join the throng which grows bigger and bigger as the day wears out."²⁷

According to Kambani White, who danced chilewe with the prophet in 1979 and 1982, when leaving the Bimbi village, Bimbi may be accompanied by between twenty and thirty people from his own village. Immediately he leaves the village he is welcomed by villagers of the next village thus increasing the number of people as he dances along and participate in the dance.²⁸

Kay Barket-Smith, writing about the role of dancing in societies where tradition still holds sway has made a rather interesting observation that the partakers are not content with hearing about the sacred

myths, they want to see them with their own eyes, participate in them and to share in their power.²⁹

It appears that in the distant past chilewe was performed on a large scale and probably attended by many people. There are also indications that chilewe, which is, in recent years, performed in time of drought conditions, was in fact an annual ceremony which marked the beginning of a series of dances of the same kind in respective rain shrines in the region whereby the new agricultural cycle was inaugurated. The reasons why this seems to have been so in the past will be made clear in the course of this discussion.

As people dance along they sing and clap their hands continuously. It is a very important occasion for this is not an ordinary dance but a form of prayer and supplication for help from God and the ancestral spirits. People sing many songs. These songs are kept secret and my informants refused to sing any to me for recording purposes. According to Kambani White, when chilewe is over Bimbi sends word to all the villages he visited that all chilewe songs which were sung during the occasion should not be sung again at any other time outside chilewe³⁰ for to sing these sacred songs outside the appropriate time can only bring a curse on the individuals concerned. Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi himself put it in this way:

"I and the people who follow me sing special songs but they are kept secret. Even those people who sing them with me they forget them soon after the chilewe dance is over. These songs are not supposed to be remembered by them for it is bad omen to remember them. They are the songs of the spirits."³¹

During my research, however, I managed to record one chilewe song which my informants sung consciously or

unconsciously. It is the only song I was able to record so far. The song is called TIYE-TIYE meaning 'let's go'. It is sung thus:

Bimbi:	Atiye tiye tiye	Let's go, let's go, let's go
	Atiye tiye tiye	Let's go, let's go, let's go
	Inu a Bongwe	You Bongwe
	Atiye tiye tiye	Let's go, let's go, let's go
	Atiye tiye tiye	Let's go, let's go, let's go

People: Ndalema ine I am tired.

My informants explained to me that Bimbi sings this song as he goes along in front of everybody. Since he runs like a whirlwind those who follow him are always left behind at a great distance. He moves mpela wa masoka (as a mad person) and one can even think that the Bimbi is mad while he is not.³²

Of special interest in this song is the role played by Bongwe.³³ We have alluded in the course of this discussion that the chilewe ritual dance may in one way or another be intended to precipitate the descent of the ancestral spirits as vehicles of rain. As we have discussed elsewhere, Bongwe is an ancestral spirit believed to be in a form of a snake-spirit and who, it is believed leads the council of the ancestral spirits who control the rain. As a controller of rainfall Bongwe is a very important figure indeed. He is therefore revered and invoked at almost all rituals for rain and especially during the times of drought.

It appears plausible to me to assume that since Bongwe as spirit-snake is involved, symbolically, in the dance in the person of the Bimbi, chilewe can be said to be the dance of the spirits in their downward movement. If we assume that Bimbi is possessed by Bongwe then we can also safely argue that

it is Bongwe himself who is the chief actor in the dance.

It can also be speculated, though it is not explicitly stated, that the other cult leaders such as Kumalekano and Kambani who dance together with the prophet also symbolise other spirits within the Bimbi religious system. The close association between the rains and Bongwe in Bimbi religious ideology is not without theological foundation for as Schoffeleers has indicated the idea of the spirits descending in the rains and hovering about the gardens in the wet season is commonplace among the Chewa. The Chewa seem to share the belief that the spirits and more particularly God are directly concerned with the people's economic well being. As a matter of fact God is thought to manifest himself primarily as a rain-provider revealing himself in the falling of the rain and its attendant phenomena such as thunder, lightning and the rainbow.³⁴

Elsewhere in Malawi snake-spirits are also particularly connected with rainfall. H.L. Vail, for instance, in his study of the Tumbuka religion, has indicated that the spirit snake Chikang'ombe controlled the rains that fell in the Tumbuka area and that when he was content the rains fell abundantly and the land was fruitful. When he was angry he could be malevolent³⁵ possibly by withholding the rains.

During chilewe dance when Bimbi is in a particular village he approaches a house, any house, goes around it and goes in. He enters the house through one door and comes out through the other door. He can sit but normally he moves on to the next house. My informants were not able to tell me why Bimbi goes into peoples' houses during chilewe. My own view is that this is an act of bringing blessings into the houses he visits and those who live in them. But apart from this, this act may be a way to show and

enhance harmony between himself and the owners of the houses which he visits. Consequently, a bond of friendship is created which heals the wounds of discontent that may exist in the social sphere as a result of the breakdown of social ties in the wider community.

It may be of interest to note that during the dance certain people are discriminated against because of their believed antisocial activities. For example Kambani White pointed out to me that if Bimbi senses that the owners of a certain house are witches (afiti or wokwima) and keep human flesh in their house, Bimbi does not approach that house or enter into it.³⁶ This is because witches are thought to be a personification of evil. By not entering their houses or going round them, it is a sign of disapproval and denunciation of their evil activities. In a sense they are counted as the outcasts of the society. Another group of people who are segregated during chilewe are those who, it is believed, hold personal grudges against the prophet himself. Bimbi is said to know about this through his spiritual insight. It is assumed that by not visiting their houses their evil intents are disclosed to the public hence put to shame. On their part this has a tremendously bad psychological impact for they think that by offending Bimbi the ancestral spirits would punish them with sickness, crop failure and even death. With this in mind many people are less inclined to offend Bimbi and do their best to avoid those circumstances which could lead to conflict with him.³⁷

This last point is a good example of the integrative nature of the Chilewe ritual dance. By avoiding those circumstances which could lead to conflict with Bimbi and the wider society, those who would otherwise be discriminated and exposed as open enemies of the society, are, through their involvement in the dance, brought back into the social

fabric. The dance thus makes further relationships with them possible and helps not only to strengthen the existing bonds but also to establish new ones.

It is also of interest to note that during chilewe Bimbi does not enter Chikuta.³⁸ Chikuta is a house for a woman in confinement with a new baby who has not yet undergone the 'coming out ceremony' to receive the full status of a human being. The woman with one or two others stays in the house for three or more days until the child is able to be seen by other people. My informants were not able to explain why Bimbi does not enter chikuta. My own assumption is that Bimbi does not enter chikuta because among the Chewa, at this stage the mother and the child are considered to be in a state of coolness. This being the case, therefore, the mother and the child must not come in contact with the hotness of men which could cause mdulo (getting cut in the chest).

It is generally assumed that Bimbi avoids chikuta without being told by anyone and that he knows about this by his spiritual insight. However, since chikuta houses have their doors a little ajar, they are an indication in themselves that they should not be entered by any man. They are taboo.

Another point worthy of note is that during Chilewe Bimbi does not come near a village where there had been a very recent funeral (maliro) even if it were three days afterwards. He does not come near funerals as a matter of fact. He avoids funeral processions by taking a different direction altogether. One recent instance of this is when Swaleyi Mkwanda's grandchild died in his house in July 1985. Traditionally he would have been expected to remain in the village during the period of traditional mourning. But much to my surprise he left his village at Kalembo the day in which the death occurred and came to stay with me in Zomba for five days. The apparent reason why Bimbi avoids death has already been discussed.³⁹

One thing which came out time and again from my informants is that Bimbi knows all the people and places he must avoid during chilewe by himself without anyone telling him about these things. By what appears to be clairvoyance and telepathy in psychological terms the Bimbi is able to steer his course of action. This alleged extrasensory perception on the part of the Bimbi by my informants was a great obstacle in itself during my fieldwork. There was hesitation and fear among the people who furnished me with some information about Bimbi under the assumption that Bimbi knows and hears everything that people talk about him as a person. This was a great limitation in collecting material.

It is important to bear in mind that when Bimbi visits a house during chilewe people give him some gifts such as a penny, one or two cobs of maize and flour. He does not receive these things himself but his followers collect them on his behalf. He only goes round a house, enters it and goes away. The money which is collected during chilewe is used for buying a metre of black cloth. The action of buying this black cloth is called kugula mtambo (to buy the cloud), and it is used as an offering at the Bimbi mother shrine in the mponda-wa-Bimbi forest by spreading it over the roof of the shrine.⁴⁰

My informants told me that money collection during chilewe is an innovation in the Bimbi cult in order to match with economic changes since the introduction of cash economy. In the distant past, before the introduction of the cash economy, maize was collected in all the region in which the Bimbi cult held sway. The maize was collected from every household from every village in small quantities. Normally a cob or two of maize were collected during a chilewe dance.

The dance used first to be held by Bimbi himself at Ulongwe and maize was collected from every

house he visited in the area. This sparked off a series of other chilewe dances at the local rain shrines led by the local cult leaders at the individual rain shrines. This, it is said, was done annually at the beginning of each and every agricultural season. According to Henry Chisinkha, one of the purposes for holding the dance was to collect maize. The maize so collected was halved. Some of it was kept by the cult leader and made into malt for beer offering. The other half was brought to Bimbi for a special blessing of the seed. It was blessed at a milawe ceremony, given out to the village headmen and to the people for planting in which case it acted as fumba (fertiliser) and chiwindo (protective medicine against wild animals).⁴¹

It appears from this that apart from blessing the fields themselves during the chilewe dance, the prophet is also concerned with the seed itself which is planted hence the need to collect the maize as was done by him and other cult leaders before. This seems to be more in line with Sachs' suggestion that more frequently in a fertility dance the dancer is identified not with the planter but with what is planted.⁴² The custom of collecting maize for a special blessing still continues but not necessarily during a chilewe dance. It is now the responsibility of the village headmen and cult leaders to ensure that such small quantities of maize and other seeds are collected from their villagers and then brought to Bimbi when they consult him at a milawe ceremony.

It is important to bear in mind that chilewe is performed under hazardous conditions. It is not a dance designed to create and enhance joy among the participants. It is a serious dance and in order to underline the solemnity of the time no food is tasted during the daytime when the dance is being held. Swaleyi Mkwanda described the situation in the following words:

"When I dance Chilewe I do not normally eat sometimes for weeks or for a month."⁴³

According to Kambani White Bimbi himself does not eat or sleep anywhere other than where the spirits tell him to do so. Bimbi is given food by the village headman in whose village he wants to spend the night. Food comes from other households also to the village headman's house in order for him to feed the dancing party. Forty to fifty people or more may be involved who share in this communal meal.⁴⁴ Two things should be taken into account here. To start with, food eating among the Chewa has a religious dimension. When people partake of the same food and of the same drink they proclaim their participation in a mystical body encompassing the living and the living-dead. When different families or groups of people meet at a communal meal they transcend their individual egoistic self in all its negative aspects to a more reconciliatory all-encompassing body in which the ancestral spirits are heads and have a great deal of influence in matters of social, political and economic welfare of the people.

Besides, communal food eating has a tremendous sociological significance in that potentially hostile segmentary sections of the community are drawn together into a harmonious whole thus strengthening social ties, and reciprocal support in a society where people have to fight hard for their survival. By eating together in a common meal, normally at an open space called bwalo, the participants express in an unprecedented way the oneness of their mind in a deeper way than words can express thus eliminating conflictive and disruptive elements in society.

That this is included in the Chilewe dance is seen in the way in which food is provided to Bimbi and his people. By entering into a communal relationship the dancers and those who provide food

become one by partaking of the same meal thus cementing solidarity relationships between the Bimbi and his followers on the one hand and the wider community on the other even in circumstances in which these were non-existent.

Here we see one of the socio-religious implications of the chilewe dance which, apart from other things, creates a unitary cosmology not only between men but also between them and the spiritual forces. We may also assume, by implication that a certain degree of harmony with nature is achieved. All in all, therefore, the chilewe dance can be said to be the dance of total incorporation. The corporate nature of the community as a whole is power which can make the seed germinate and the plant to grow and harvest more or less secured. Thus through the collectivity man participates in the myth of creation and of its present actualisation. And since creation is the first stage of salvation it seems plausible to argue that in the chilewe dance salvation is not only a future event but a present reality which can be acted upon and brought about.

Chilewe may last for two or three weeks. Sometimes it lasts for a month. It all depends, so it is believed, on how many villages the spirits want Bimbi to cover. Bimbi under the influence of spirits may decide to dance chilewe up to chief Chimwala, in Mangochi District, to Mwima in Machinga or even as far away as Liwonde's area.⁴⁵

Kambani White gave me the following testimony:

"If he goes to dance Chilewe far away he may stay there for five days. I follow him in the dance. I danced Chilewe with him last time. It was danced here at Kalembo. He performed Chilewe at Nandumbo's, Milala, Mawoni, Namalomba, Chidothi, Namungumi, Mpango and other villages there which I cannot remember by name."⁴⁶

In the dance, Yao, Chewa, Ngoni and Lomwe villages are covered as if they were under one 'tribal' chief with the same political and social interests. It can be seen from these testimonies that Chilewe is a transcendental dance for it ignores the limitations imposed upon the wider society by family, lineage and tribal affiliations. For in a dance the dancers are required to adopt the same rhythm, in other words they must look alike in their steps for it is the harmoniously co-ordinated way of the dancers' movements dancing in unison with nature and the spirit world which makes the Chilewe dance a religiously meaningful dance and not chaos. Chilewe dance is as it were a re-enactment of the creation story whereby order is established over chaos.

When the days set for Chilewe are over and the Bimbi feels that he has achieved his main objectives, he and his party return to the Bimbi village. Kambani White has it that when going back to the village people still sing Chilewe songs. When they arrive in the Bimbi village they must not be welcomed by anyone. Once they arrive with their luggage they sing and dance around for sometime and then stop and rest. Some of the money collected during chilewe is distributed to the participants from the Bimbi village and the rest is used for buying a black cloth for the mother rain shrine in the Mponda forest. This done people resume their normal life and the scene is set for milawe.

b Milawe: possession seance

"Belief, ritual and spiritual experience, these three are the corner stones of religion and the greatest of them is the last."⁴⁷

The preliminaries

For all practical purposes, chilewe is a preparatory stage for milawe. Milawe is a religious ceremony involving spirit possession and it is the most important ritual in the life and call to Bimbishop of the incumbent. The dominant belief is that during milawe Bimbi is seized by the ancestral spirits who fall upon him and make him speak on their behalf thus revealing to him alone the secrets of the spirit world in the heavenly council of the ancestral spirits. The content of this révelation is more often than not related to weather conditions prevailing at the time of the consultations or in the near or far future. Through this kind of knowledge, so it is believed, people are enabled to prevent the occurrence of a drought or to counter-attack the adverse effects of an existing drought by following the advice given to them by Bimbi at a milawe sitting.

For lack of better terminology I translate milawe here as possession seance that is a group meeting or sitting usually in darkness, for the purpose of investigating psychic phenomena.⁴⁸ Since milawe is believed to be conducted in a state of spirit possession we can argue that Bimbi temporarily ceases to be a mere human being and becomes a quasi-spiritual being in order to be the vocie of the ancestral spirits and sometimes of Chauta the ultimate source of all being.

Rymond W. Firth has defined spirit possession as a set of practices and ideas based upon belief in the entry of a spirit into the human being (or a close control by a spirit of the body of the human being) so that actions of the person affected are thought to be either those of the spirit or to be directly dictated by the spirit.⁴⁹ Elizabeth Colson in her study of spirit possession among the Tonga of Zambia has pointed out that when an individual is in

a state of spirit possession, a spirit is said to have entered (kunjila) the body of the one possessed and that during periods of active possession the vehicle is addressed as the spirit and treated in ways regarded as appropriate for that spirit.⁵⁰ In this respect the common interpretation in communities where spirit possession takes place, seems to be that anything said by the possessed person should be thought of as the utterance of the spirit itself.⁵¹ The subject, it is believed, no longer speaks with his own voice but that of the spirits or the gods he is supported by, this being detected by the intermittent utterance and change in the quality of the voice used.⁵²

As to the purpose of possession by the gods or spirits, it is assumed, that these enter the person in order to foretell the future, or to proclaim their will or to utter an indictment on the nature of the moral behaviour of the people.⁵³ It is interesting to note that almost all these elements are evident in one form or another in the milawe ceremony that I am about to describe.

Rymond Firth differentiates spirit possession from spirit mediumship. According to Firth, in spirit possession the individual's behaviour does not necessarily convey any particular message while in spirit mediumship the emphasis is upon communication. Here the extra-human entity is not merely expressing himself but is regarded as having something to say to an audience.⁵⁴ My own observation of the way in which Bimbi operates at a milawe ceremony strongly suggests that he is a spirit medium and not just a person who is simply possessed. His possession experiences end up by giving a special message to the people who come to consult him in times of crisis.

To Bimbi himself and his elders this is a great opportunity for it is through milawe that Bimbi is able to propagate his teaching about Chauta and His relationship with man, and about human relationships

and the relationship between man and the world of nature. For these reasons milawe stands at the apex of the rituals performed by Bimbi. It is interesting to note that sometimes Bimbi in his role as wobwe-bweta za mvula is conceived of as ng'anga (physician) and the consultants themselves as patients.⁵⁵

One of my informants put it this way:

"When we go to consult Bimbi before we can make an offering for rain at our rain shrines we go there as to a ng'anga. No one takes medicine before diagnosis and the Bimbi is, literally speaking, "he who knows the disease" and "knows its cure."⁵⁶

In an atypical year Bimbi can hold as many milawe as required depending on the number of shrine officials who come to consult him from different districts within the Upper Shire Valley and beyond.⁵⁷ Generally milawe are held between November and January. If the rains are good only village headmen from chief Liwonde and chief Kalembo go to Bimbi for milawe as part of a long standing tradition whereby they can be given a mandate and the dates when they can make offerings at their respective rain shrines. To them milawe gives them an opportunity to screen their social relationships and make common allegiance to the cult. But whenever rains are bad and there is a territorial-wide crisis an influx of delegates from other shrines converge to Bimbi village to seek for the "cure" for their "social diseases" which are believed to have a bearing on atmospheric changes. They call this action kupempha madzi kwa a Bimbi (to ask for water from Bimbi), and chief Liwonde has it that he sends his delegates to Bimbi because Bimbi's ancestral spirits are the ones who control the rains in the land, for ne achimisyene chilambo achino (they are the guardians of the land).⁵⁸

The first point to be emphasised here is that

when a drought occurs the first questions people ask are why has it occurred, who has caused it and how to combat it. The question of causality and effect is a very interesting one in the study of Chewa religion and the Bimbi cult in particular. As regards rain the first suspicion is that society itself has caused it, that is, drought is a result of human sin and that because of this God and his messengers, the ancestral spirits, are angry. Consequently, drought is looked upon as a form of punishment against sinful man. Looked at from this point of view the Chewa conceive the whole society as potentially evil and dangerous. Society is a potential enemy of itself. The devil is not out there. It is society itself in its passions of the flesh which is full of jealousies. Since this is a pathological state of affairs, it becomes a kind of spiritual disease hence in need of spiritual healing for the total community. With this in mind the Bimbi at milawe is said often to accuse people of two main sins, one directly related to God and another directly related to one's neighbour. As regards sin against God, Bimbi tends to accuse people that they have become worldly by stopping to honour God and render him that worship which is due to him alone through prayers and offerings according to the traditions of the elders. Bimbi sees secularisation and modernisation as constant threats in man's relationship with God for they make man self-conceited and self-sufficient. For example, at the milawe ceremony of 11th November, 1984 which I attended Bimbi rebuked the people and the chiefs because of their ungodliness as a result of their modernisation tendencies. He said:

"When I tell you to make offerings to Mulungu through the ancestral spirits, some of you say 'no, we cannot do this. These are old ways. This is not good for us. We must follow modern ways. We are well educated and becoming rich'.

Modern chiefs too in their modern attire have grown worldly. They have forsaken Mulungu. Is that righteousness?

I ask you this: "Who can among you say to himself or to his car, his money, his well built house 'I want rain, give me some rain'. Will rain come? Will man himself or these things give him rain?" No, rain will not come. Rain comes from Mulungu. Mulungu gives us rain when we stand before him and prostrate in prayer at the shrine for rain. It is Mulungu and Mulungu alone who gives us rain. We cannot make rain, no matter how rich, powerful or educated we are. We must not, therefore, cheat ourselves that we do not need Mulungu. We must worship Mulungu always."⁵⁹

As regards sin against one's neighbour Bimbi always attacks envy and jealousies in society which lead to quarrels over titles, breaking of family and village taboos, fighting over farming land and social injustice of the powerful over the weak. Bimbi sees pride as the root of much social and moral evil. Bimbi teaches that each person has a spirit.⁶⁰ When this spirit is worried, the spirits of his ancestors also worry and in turn join the civil strife and this causes an imbalance in the socio-ecological system experienced in terms of drought and other calamities. The balance can only be obtained by redressing the wrongs committed to God and to one's neighbour.

But at other times droughts are believed to be caused by witches (afiti) who by using black magic can render the sky cloudless. This action is called kumanga mvula (rain stopping) and it is thought to be highly antisocial, devilish and deserving capital punishment if modern society would allow. We will have room later to discuss the implications of rain stopping. It suffices here to say that it can be a ground of much social discontent among the people concerned which may force them to go to Bimbi for

consultations to find the culprit.

It is important to point out that the circumstances which force people to go to Bimbi for milawe are real life situations based on great anxieties on how in face of an all out drought people can secure some rain for their crops. It may be of interest to note that there is a striking difference here between the way in which the Bimbi operates during milawe season and the way in which the spirit medium in the Mbona cult functions.

According to J.M. Schoffeleers, spirit possession in the Mbona cult is provoked by spates of fantastic rumour. Schoffeleers has it that rumour does, among other things, not only provide much pressure which finally generates the possession seance but also determines the contents of the message which the medium communicates.⁶¹ It also appears that the decision of the chiefs to attend or not to attend a particular possession seance depends, to a large extent, on rumour as it escalates the environmental and climatic crisis. When these are less pronounced the principal chiefs may not turn up and the medium's career may be in jeopardy and it may be irreparably damaged.⁶²

This is not the case in the Bimbi cult. Rumour does not play any part. Requests for a possession seance come from the people through their village headmen and their chiefs and the Bimbi's pronouncements have authority on their own right. For the practical analysis of this chapter we will use the Yao chiefdom of Kalembo as a case in point.

When there is drought people in the villages begin to get greatly troubled and become anxious and restless. This concern from the people reaches chief Kalembo through his councillors. Chief Kalembo in turn sends for Group village headman Mpango (Yao) village headman Chingwalungwalu (Yao), village headman Mmaniwa (Chewa) and village headman Mkanda

(Chewa) and asks them to go to kupoposya kwa a Bimbi (to ask Bimbi to hold milawe). This combination of Chewa and Yao village headmen is significant here. It is intended to present, in the words of chief Kalembo, "the unity of the Yao and the Chewa social groups as a people".⁶³ This purpose of unity is a prerequisite for a successful milawe.

At the meeting between chief Kalembo and his village headmen, Mpango is advised to call for a solemn meeting of all the village headmen in the area. Normally at the subsequent meeting of all the headmen the drought conditions are discussed. According to village headman Ku-Mayela they always decide to go and consult Bimbi. Then at that meeting village headman ku-Tambala is asked to go to Bimbi to ask him to let the village headmen from chief Kalembo's area come to consult him. Upon ku-Tambala's visit to Bimbi a date is fixed for milawe and reported back to the village headmen. Meanwhile a collection of between K2-00 and K3-00 (£1.75) is made for the purpose of buying a piece of black cloth which is always required for milawe and without which no milawe can take place.⁶⁴

In far distant districts when the elders of rain shrines and village headmen confer together they often decide to form a delegation comprising themselves or other responsible men in the community. The delegation must comprise not less than three people. When they come from various areas to consult Bimbi they first report at ku-Tambala's village before they take any other step. It is only delegates from chief Liwonde led by Idilisa Ajitu Nsungu, who go directly to Bimbi village.

Once delegates arrive in ku-Tambala village they are welcomed by village headman Mposa. He is village headman ku-Tambala's assistant. Ku-tambala in turn goes to Bimbi village and informs Kumalekano or Kambani (when the former is absent) of the presence of the consultants. Kumalekano sees Bimbi in person to

seek admittance for the delegates for milawe. A date is fixed for milawe which may be the same day or several days later.⁶⁵

On the appointed day the delegates (except those from Liwonde) assemble at ku-Tambala village ready to go to Bimbi village. At about 3.00pm or 4.00pm they all leave ku-Tambala village to Bimbi village three miles away from ku-Tambala village. When they arrive in Bimbi village they all go to Bimbi's senior wife's house where they are met by Kumalekano and Kambani. Kumalekano engages them in preliminary talks about their intentions. They brief him on what they want.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, on this day, the spirits are said to come mightily upon Bimbi. During the day Bimbi behaves strangely talking to himself as if he were a mad person. This strange behaviour increases as the sun goes down. Between 2.00pm and 3.00pm, that is long before the delegates arrive in the Bimbi village, Bimbi encloses himself in the kachisi-wa-milawe and begins to kubwebweta (rave). Soon after dark by about 6.30 and 7.00 Bimbi becomes increasingly disturbed sometimes letting himself fall against the floor of the shrine or bang the walls of the shrine.

It is interesting to note that the custom of enclosing oneself for the purpose of spirit possession is typical of Chewa prophetism. Alexander Hetherwick for instance, in his study of Chewa religious institutions reported:

"Till recently, a local mbona or seer; lived near Port Herald who claimed divine powers for himself and whose wife-always chosen from a certain family-acted as priestess and means of communication with the outer world, he having shut himself up in complete seclusion."⁶⁷

In his extensive study of the Mbona cult Matthew

Schoffeleers has also indicated that when Mankhokwe, one of the Chewa Paramount chiefs in the Lower Shire Valley, wanted to consult Mbona's spirit wife on Thyolo Mountain, he and his deputies would proceed to the top of the mountain with horn-blowing and shouting to make the spirit wife know of their approach. She would then retire to the seclusion of her hut, hear without seeing those who came to her and deliver the answer next day in the same way.⁶⁸

During milawe Bimbi wears his full priestly dress - a black cassock with a black headgear. As in the case of the shaman these may be intended to enable the prophet attain the ecstasy necessary for communicating with the spirits. It is not known for certain how Bimbi attains his ecstatic state since it happens behind closed doors. Scholars on ecstatic religion have pointed out that in a voluntary spirit possession in which the medium puts himself at the disposal of the spirit to be his mouth piece, various means are employed combined or individually to induce the state of possession. These include the use of alcoholic spirits, hypnotic suggestions, rapid over-breathing, the inhalation of smoke and vapours and other psychotropic alkaloids.⁶⁹

All my informants unanimously asserted that during milawe Bimbi does not use drugs or any other artificial method in order to make himself possessed. How far this is true is difficult to say and one is always bound to hit a blank wall because of the nature of the belief in spirit possession prevalent among the Chewa. For the Chewa, as Hetherwick once observed, strongly believe that the mizimu (spirits) make their presence known and communicate their wishes to the living by means of dreams during which the spirits of the dead hold discourse with the spirits of the living and the spirits of the living hold discourse with each other through the medium of the mlaula or prophet who is inspired by the mizimu to rave

(kubwebweta), the ravings being accepted as the voice of the dead.⁷⁰ It can, however, be suggested that Bimbi attains his ecstatic state by means of self-imposed mortification and privation such as fasting which he is said to observe during the greater part of the rainy season. Besides, the social pressure on him during milawe and before seems to be quite considerable to induce a state of spirit possession. As Rymond Firth has indicated the sheer expectations of an audience often help to provide a situation congenial to the development of trance behaviour in persons in the appropriate social position.⁷¹

At nightfall all the delegates led by Kumalekano go to the kachisi-wa-milawe. When they reach there all sit around on the khonde (verandah) men on the right hand side and women on the left hand side according to the customs of the land. The delegates bring with them mtambo (a piece of black cloth - the sky). The length of the black cloth varies. Sometimes it is $1\frac{1}{2}$, two or even three yards. This piece of black cloth is handed over to Kumalekano who in turn passes it on to Bimbi inside the shrine through the western door. This action is called kugula mtambo (to buy the cloud). Sometimes a white piece of cloth is produced if people want to ask for less rain. The following day the piece of black cloth so brought by the people is presented as an offering at the rain shrine in the Mponda forest by spreading it on the roof of the shrine.

Apart from bringing mtambo with them the delegates also bring along such seeds as maize, rice, pumpkins, peas, beans, sorghum and others mixed together in a small bag. This bag, containing a mixture of seeds, is also passed on to Bimbi at the same time as the black cloth. It stays in the shrine overnight. It is believed that the seed is blessed by the ancestral spirits during milawe for the new agricultural season. In the following morning the

Bimbi's spirit wife removes the maize from the shrine, hands it to Kumalekano and he in turn hands it to the village headmen who in turn give it to young boys to distribute it to the people for the purpose of mixing it with their own seed for planting. This seed is supposed to activate the growth of the crops.⁷²

When all people assemble at the kachisi-wa-milawe, Malekano introduces each village headman or special delegate by name to Bimbi. This preliminary introduction is called kupelekela mau kwa a Bimbi (to send in word to Bimbi). During milawe a dialogue is established between the Bimbi inside the shrine and the people outside. It has been suggested that an integral characteristic of shamanic possession is that those people who are present are not mere objective spectators but rather faithful believers and it is their belief which enables the shaman to achieve the goals desired.⁷³

A very important figure also present at every milawe ceremony and always sitting on the right hand of the westdoor is Laurence Mdala who, as we have already seen, is a man responsible for saying PEPAA (please, pardon me). He says pepaa at an interval of between approximately five and ten minutes from the beginning of the ceremony to the very end.

It is important to bear in mind that what Bimbi says at milawe is zobwebweta (ravings). He does not comprehend himself and cannot remember what he says at milawe the following day. My informants said that he speaks ngati njoka yoduka mutu (like a snake which has lost its head).⁷⁴

Since what Bimbi says is largely unintelligible he is helped by Kumalekano to tell the people the clear and straight meaning of his speeches. He is sometimes helped by Kambani White when Kumalekano is not present. According to Kambani White and Laurence Mdala and from personal observations, when Bimbi holds milawe he speaks Chichewa. Laurence Mdala, however,

has it that though Bimbi uses Chichewa there are times

"when he uses languages not of this world - amangobwebweta-bwebweta (he raves and raves). One cannot understand what he says. After he has spoken in unintelligible language then he speaks in Chichewa to Kumalekano to tell us what he said in his kubwebweta (raving). No one understands what Bimbi says in his ravings. No one can interpret that even Kumalekano. What happens is that after his ravings he then translates this in Chichewa to Kumalekano and Kumalekano to the people."⁷⁵

Kambani White, who sometimes works like Kumalekano when Afiki Kumalekano himself is prevented from attending milawe because of sickness, recounted to me the following as part of his experiences for working as an interpreter.

"When one of the village headmen outside speaks Yao, then Bimbi says to me: "what does that man say there?" He says this because he does not understand Yao at milawe. I, then, tell him what was said in Chichewa. All the time Bimbi holds milawe he speaks Chichewa and no single Yao word is said. When he is inside Bimbi talks to the spirits in Chichewa. Sometimes I cannot even understand what is said between Bimbi and the spirits. I cannot understand even a word. At other times strange voices come out of the shrine as if there are many people inside. At other times there is shouting and singing with a shrill.

Bimbi speaks unintelligibly especially if there is a crisis of drought in the area where the delegates come from. In critical moments Bimbi pauses for a moment and engages himself in a monologue (amalankhula yekha). This is the time I cannot understand anything because the conversation which goes on inside the shrine is between Bimbi and the spirits.

Then afterwards when he has finished talking with the ancestral spirits he addresses himself to me in Chichewa telling me what the spirits told him.

forewarning of events to come and a prescription of remedies against approaching adversity."⁷⁸

The structure of milawe

Among the rituals performed by Bimbi, milawe is the most structured of them all. Two carefully tape recorded milawe ceremonies which I witnessed in November, 1984 revealed the following liturgical formula:

- 1 Introduction '(malonje)
- 2 Opening prayer by Bimbi invoking the ancestral spirits
- 3 The supplications of the people
- 4 The sermon
- 5 The prayer for rain
- 6 Dismissal

It is important to point out here that the two milawe which I witnessed were both peaceful, therefore were conducted throughout in Chichewa which I was able to comprehend. During the two ceremonies the interpreter was Kambani White in the absence of Kumalekano. The first milawe which was requested by chief Liwonde was attended by 109 people including eight village headmen led by Idilisa Ajitu Msungu.⁷⁴ The second milawe ceremony was requested by chief Kalembo and was attended by 125 people.⁸⁰ The audience in both cases comprised men, women, boys and girls from the surrounding villages. At both occasions the ceremonies began at 6.30pm and lasted for two hours. The following text reveals the nature and the functioning of a milawe ceremony which I propose to examine on the basis of the structure set out above. The text is based on the milawe of 17th of November which is most representative.

The Introduction (malonje)

The introduction consists of a series of exchanges between the people and Bimbi through the mediumship of Kumalekano (in this case Kambani), which I call here malonje (greetings).

Kambani to Bimbi: "Ichotu icho, ichotu icho (may we come in)
(People clap hands first loudly - phu, phu, phu - and then the clapping dies away. Kambani continues)

I, Kambani, have come here in the village. I have come here because village headman Kutambala came to see me. He said to me: 'we have come here, we want the door. We want you to show us the door to Bimbi so that we can hear what is about to happen about rain this year! So the following village headmen are here: Ku-Tambala, Mposa, Makunganya, Magombe, Malidade, Nyangwa, Mayera, Kasenjera, Ligwangwa, Majikuta, Galanje, Mmaniwa and Mkanda. We will hear together the messages which these village headmen have brought with them."

Ku-Tambala to Bimbi

"- Yes, ambuye (our Lord), we have come here. We have come here to enquire about what will happen this year. We have been rather astonished in the way in which the rain has come this year. It has rained continually for the whole week. So we are astonished and wonder what this is going to be. We have come here to the door (khomo) to find out about this. We have come to ask you for advice since we have been asking ourselves saying: 'why is this rain coming like this?'

Kambani to Bimbi: "Yes, Ku-Tambala says that he has come here because he is rather astonished. Why has the rain come in the way it did? But in addition to this he has come because he sees that the dry season is coming to an end. Now he has seen

that it has rained continuously.
 Because of this he has decided to
 come here to find out whether the
 proper rainy season has begun, or
 whether they should wait until
 next month. He has come to hear
 about this here at Mponda. So
 I end here but there will be many
 things said here.

Opening prayer by Bimbi invoking the ancestral spirits
(chanted soloistically)

A Sakasaka eee
 A Kuugule eee
 A Zembe eee
 A Sokopio eee
 A Bongwe eee
 A Mkulukutwa eee
 A Namanje eee
 A Kasenjera eee
 All these village headmen eee
 Have come here to ask eee
 What will this year's rainy season eee
 Will be like eee
 They have come to ask for rain eee
 A Sakasaka ee
 This rain eee
 Has come continuously eee
 There are pools of water eee
 On the valleys eee⁸¹

The supplications of the people

It should be noted that at milawe each and
 every delegate is required to state individually
 his request to the spirits. The requests are
 formulated in a case form.

The following are some of the pleas which were
 made to the spirits after Bimbi had told the delegates
 to speed up and work hard in their gardens because the
 proper rainy season had come.

Ku-Tambala to Bimbi

How are we going to speed up clearing our gardens since the month is almost ended? How many weeks are we left with? Is not true to say that by the beginning of next week the new moon will appear? We want to hear what you Bimbi say about this.

Magombe to Bimbi

The problem is that it is true that we are late in clearing our gardens. We are indeed late. But we have come here at Mponda to plead for help as has already been said by village headman ku-Tambala. Our plea is this: why have the rains come so continuously? We feel that this type of rain is not good enough. So we said to ourselves: 'let's go and ask'.

Now since you have already explained in the way you did that the proper rainy season has begun, we say 'let the rains come'. But now what we are asking here is that when the rain comes, let it come gently. This is because some of the people right here have not started clearing their gardens. Others have done very little so far. Still others will have already planted and the maize in their gardens has already sprouted.

Now here it is true that the time has run out but we have many things to say and ask for help. To start with there is wind. We do not want what happened last year when our fences were broken and blown away by the wind. We do not want that to happen again. We do not want broken trees in our villages.

We want rain which falls gently but not violently as if it were war! We do not want njazi (lightning). If there is lightning let it bring good rain, because lightning is good. It brings rain but it should not visit the homes of people. It is dangerous to peoples' lives and property. We all fear it even these children gathered here.

These two things - wind and lightning - are dangerous to people and crops. Then there are other bad things such as njerere, msolola mnunkhadala, (all crop eating insects) and others. Please prevent them from destroying our crops.

Wild pigs too must go about eating grass

in the bush. They should not come down to our gardens to eat people's crops. If we have done something wrong which you need to tell us, tell us so that we may put it right. Tell us what to do in our homes so that we do as told because we want food. This is why we do come here to plead for help from you here at Mponda. Because what happened this year is a good thing in that some of us here present still have plenty of food in our homes. If there are people without food they are few since it is not possible for everyone to have as much food as everyone else.

We are very happy that this year we have had plenty of food. We are very happy indeed. This is why we have come here again so that we should have some more help from you. My lords, my words end here.

Kasenjera to Bimbi

What Magonbe has said let it be so. But we have a lot of diseases around here. Please, we want you to remove all these from us so that we can have peace.

Malidade to Bimbi

I, on, my part only thank you for assuring us that the rain will come. Please, forgive us if we have wronged. These are my words.

Majikuta to Bimbi

I will speak in Yao for I am not a Nyasa (Chewa). I say that it is true that this year we have great joy ...

You can see the way I have come. I ran all the way from Kalembo to this place here. I am not going to say many words. We rejoice today and say to you inside there 'lord, please, intercede to Mulungu (God) on our behalf so that we can be as happy as we have been this year.

This year you will not find any hungry child. Everyone has enough food. This year we have even doubled the number of children we have. So I say to you, 'please, pray for us to Mulungu on our behalf so that we can have enough food and be able to bear as many children as possible.

At the moment we do not even have enough land to grow more food. Thus lord, we are so happy that you are here and we ask Mulungu to protect you from all ills so that we can continue having someone to whom we can go in times of need ...

We are happy when the rain comes from the eastern side of the lake until the maize is mature enough to take the rain coming from other directions. The real rain which we want and the rain we ask from your ancestors in the rain coming from the East. I ask clearly and I think you lord there and your ancestral spirits will be able to help us.

Mposa to Bimbi

Last year we had very good rain. We have had plenty of food this year. If there are people about going hungry they are few. We enjoy the freedom from anxiety as to what we are going to eat.

We want the same freedom (ufulu) this year. Our complaint is 'why is it that at the beginning of the rainy season the rain comes so well and that when the maize is about to mature there is a long spell of dry weather?' When this happens we are very worried because at the very time we expect good crop the rain stops.

Is that freedom then? No, it is not freedom. It is slavery! So we would like to ask you to intercede to the spirits in our favour, so that when the rain comes it should not stop when the crops need it. These are my words. I have spoken. I end here.

The Sermon

After the interpreter has summed up the intentions of the supplicants Bimbi himself takes over by delivering a sermon. The sermon is the most dominant feature of the ritual.

"In the beginning Chauta (God) created the waters. There were no stars, no moon and no sun. God was ministered by angels. Then God created Adam and his kinsmen. People multiplied so much that the earth was full

and there was no arable land left and people began to kill one another and turned into cannibals.

Then Chauta (God) decided to destroy them. They were destroyed by Noah's flood. Noah's ark rested on mount Ararat. The black people were created there. Their ancestress was Nyangu. She bore two sons - Chinkhole and Chisonzi. They were strong sons. When they were living on mount Ararat they called themselves Phiri (mountain).

From there they went to Egypt in the land of the Arabs. From there they went to Mchemba and from Mchemba they went to Zambezi. From Zambezi they went to Uchewa and from there to Kapoche. From Kapoche they moved to Kaphirintiwa and then to Msinja. From Msinja they went to Phirisonzi to Ntcheu and finally to Ulongwe. There were altogether twelve settlements.

When the Chewa arrived here they found nobody here but wild animals. Then after many years the Yao came from the southern end of Tanzania. Four years later the whites came. When the whites came and christianity came they said to us, 'you black people are different from us, what you are doing is wrong; you must give up'.

We have been accused of idolatry. But the White people's worship is idolatrous. Long time ago we used to say that Chauta (God) is our Mulungu. We used to pray:

"Oh, Chauta our Father,
We want rain
Send some rain
we are your children
we are dying"

Then we made our offerings for rain and rain came. We also made offerings to drive away wild animals such as lions and elephants and they fled away. We made offerings for the sick against influenza and small pox and people were healed.

Then when the whites came they said: 'this is rubbish, give up. We have brought you new ways and new things'. Then we listened to their teaching. It started with Abraham and all other men of the past. Then we began to ask ourselves: 'what is new and what is old in religion today?'

Our ancestors here invoked Chauta's name. They had a moral code which taught them to distinguish good from evil. Long time ago we did not have here either Islam or Christianity. We did not have either

the Bible or the Koran. Long before the Koran and the Bible came our ancestors knew that in the world there is Mulungu or Chauta. There was mutual respect based on the belief that there is Mulungu. How did our ancestors know all this?

Today the churches attack us saying 'You are idolatrous; you worship under a foot of a tree? But who is idolatrous? What is the difference between our offerings and the offerings made in the white people's country? How did their offerings begin? Did they not offer under a tree?

We see in the churches statues of men and women who died long time ago. Christians worship these statues made by men. They have turned these into their God! Is that God's way? You christians have what you call Christmas. You buy a lot of things and christmas trees. You pray before them in churches. These are very old practices of peoples of a different past. Why do you still observe them? You observe them because this is the way in which the white missionaries used to pray long before we were born and this is why they do not want to give them up. This is their tradition and it cannot die.

Why is it that when we African peoples want to ask Chauta to send rain through our ancestors the missionaries say: 'no, this is not good for modern man? Is that righteousness?

People's response: No, it is uchimo (sin)

Bimbi: "We remember our ancestors who died long time ago. We believe they are alive today. Look at the world around you - the stars, the moon, the sun, the earth, all these were created long ago. We have not seen Chauta. We cannot cheat ourselves 'I know Chauta, I worship Chauta'. We cannot know Chauta. We cannot give him the proper honour due to him.

But I tell you this 'if you honour your brother, you have honoured Chauta because your brother is Chauta's creation. He comes from Chauta. All the chiefs and village headmen pray to Mulungu that he should give them his goodness - the rain. Let me ask you a question: 'when someone dies do you bury him up in the sky?

People's response: No, we bury him on the ground.

Bimbi: May I ask you another question: 'do trees grow up in the sky?'

People's response: No, on the ground.

Bimbi: Now the maize we are talking about and our gardens, are they up in the sky?

People's response: No, on the ground.

Bimbi: Now about us the living: 'do we live up in the sky?'

People's response: No, we live here on earth.

Bimbi: When you plant your maize you put it on the ground and you cover it with some earth. When it sprouts does it grow upwards or downwards?

People's response: It grows upward.

Bimbi: You have answered correctly. But why is it that instead of growing downwards it grows upwards? Let me explain why this is so. When you grow your maize it does not grow downwards but upwards. You make a hole on the ground, you put the seed in it and you cover it with some earth but the maize sprouts and grows heavenwards. This happens to all plants and trees. In the same way all the people in the world adzafukuka (they will rise) and will go to heaven. Now I will tell you everything in detail. Starting from September through to October and November there is whirlwind. This whirlwind draws water from the earth up to the sky. There in the sky the water thus drawn by the whirlwind forms clouds of rain. Look at the mountain over there. Those clouds are rain clouds. The heavens are full of water. It is the whirlwind and the ordinary wind which forms the dark clouds in the sky.

The clouds draw water from the water which was formerly here on earth. Then after the clouds have been formed they are moved here and there by the wind. The clouds inside produce lightning (mphezi). When lightning produces its dreadful sound the clouds are moved around by the winds.

If they reach a village in which there live bad people they turn into strong wind and break trees, destroy fences and houses ... Why? The reason is found in the way in which people here on earth worship Mulungu. If Mulungu sees that people are of the same mind (ali ndi mtima umodzi) he sends very good rain and plenty of it.

Any divine cause which prevents the rain stems from us men here on earth. It is here on earth where we can say prayers to Mulungu for rain. For even the white people's worship of Mulungu must be grounded here on earth. It is only when we stand here on earth that we can say to Mulungu: 'Ambuye mutipatse chuma' (Lord, give us wealth).

Any form of worship of Mulungu must start here on earth where we stand. All the living are living here on earth. They are not up in heaven. Those of you who worship Jesus and ask him to help you in the future, you must worship him here on this earth. Do not cheat yourselves saying: 'we will worship and find Mulungu up in heaven. No, that is wrong. Mulungu is here on earth. You must worship him here.

There are angels who announce the coming of rain, angels who announce the coming of strong wind, angels who announce the coming of epidemics, angels who announce the coming of wild animals and fish.

Jesus Christ was born here on earth. He used to converse with the angels. And Mohammed too used to talk to the angels. Were they not born here on earth? It is because they were born here on earth that they were able to say "This is what Mulungu says". All that begins here. Let's see what the Bible says. There you say there are angels to whom you say: 'pass on our prayers to Jesus ...

This is equal to what we do here. Long before Jesus, Paul, Peter and John were born, people did not offer their sacrifices in a church built with human hands. The first worshippers made their offerings at the foot of trees. People used to gather and worship Mulungu there.

Now when we pray under a tree you say: 'no, that is old, that is no good for us modern men'. The white missionaries say that we must discard our ancestral spirits and that we should not call upon them when we pray for rain. Do you think the rain will come?

Peoples' response: No, the rain will not come

Bimbi: The white missionaries too in their own country pray to Mulungu mentioning the names of their ancestral spirits ...

Now about nkhumulu, nkhang, and nguluwe, (predators), why do they destroy crops? If you see such things happening you must reflect upon your own behaviour. Ask yourselves: 'tikuyenda bwanji? (how do we deal with other people?), tikulungosola bwanji (how do we sort out matters affecting us?)

See how you behave: your words and your actions. Do you hear me? When the wind destroys trees and scatters mangoes on the trees you must ask yourselves: 'what wrong have we done?'. 'How do we handle things? You must find out all about these things. Long time ago our ancestors used to put things right whenever they went wrong. When they came here mnyumba samapita (they refrained from sexual intercourse)

People's response: Yes that is what they used to do long time ago.

Bimbi: In the past, all those who came here for milawe refrained from sexual intercourse two days before they came here. That tradition was strictly observed. It was the basic requirement for milawe.

Why does the rain come? It comes in order to give people joy in their hearts. When people fight and kill one another there cannot be peace enough for them to be able to farm. They move too much about. How can the rain come? What should it come for?

The rain comes because Mulungu created animals. It comes for the people. How can the rain come when people do not sit down peacefully? The rain comes in order to give people joy.

I now ask all the village headmen and chiefs in the whole country to pray to Mulungu that he should give us enough rain. In the past when people prayed to Mulungu for rain here at Mponda they could not go to their homes without being rained upon ...

I now announce that the rain is coming. The second thing I want to announce is that the crops this year will be good. You have mentioned nkhumulu, nkhang and other crops destroying insects, birds and animals. Do not worry. The crops this year will be

the best ever (mmela umangana)

People's response: ugwirane kumene (let it be so)

Bimbi: Now, you the village headmen of this area have come. You say that some of you have planted, others have not. What I tell you is this that you should all start planting now and not go beyond fifteenth of December. That is the dead line. If you happen to plant after that or leave till January, you will make a big mistake. Get on making ridges now and plant your maize at the same time.

You must make sure that by Christmas you have started weeding your crops. I now ask Kasenjera, Malidade, Mmaniwa, Ku-Tambala, ku-Magombe and Kambani to prepare malt. After that come to see me here and I will give you the dates when beer offering should be ready.

The great prayer for rain (in a soloist form)

A Sakasaka eee
 A Phungu eee
 A Bongwe eee
 A Mkulukutwa eee
 A Namichenje eee
 A Nakhau eee
 A Sinyanda eee
 A Makhaya eee
 A Namaleyo eee
 A Songwe eee
 A Nyangu eee
 A Chilembwe eee
 A Kasenjera eee
 A Namanje eee
 A Mchelecheta eee
 A Mtondo-wa-nthenga eee
 A Fumbi eee
 A Mtangaluwembe eee
 A Chapita eee

A Kalonga Akubanda eee
 A Chilambi eee
 A Namkwakwalala eee
 A Chimombo eee
 A Chipojola eee
 A Tyola Mpanda eee
 A Malombola eee
 A Nyemvu eee

Give the people eee
 In the whole of Malawi eee
 rain eee
 Give them rain from the East eee
 Let the wind be less strong eee
 When the rain comes
 Let the rain begin at 4.00pm
 and let it rain through the night until 9.00am

The dismissal

Kambani to Bimbi:

Yes, the words you have spoken have been heard by all the village headmen here present. We ask you now that the spirits inside there should hear our prayers. Let them protect us from diseases, pigs, nkhululu, nkhangwa, njiwa, namsolola, mbewa and anunkhadala. Please, prevent these pests and animals from destroying our crops.

We have noted what you said to us that crisis comes about as a result of the village headmen's failure to unite people together. When chiefs and village headmen are not united, there is war. When there is war, the spirits join the strife and send a very strong wind instead of rain.

You, Mkulukutwa and Sakasaka help us by drawing together the clouds of rain from the east. We want the rain from the East. Let the northern rain and the southern rain come but not much. Let it rain at night since people are sleeping then so that they wake up in the morning and be able to work in the gardens. We do not want lightning.

The village headmen here will follow your instructions. They will prepare malt and when this is ready they will come to tell you that they are ready. Now these village headmen are saying farewell to you. They are now leaving to their villages.

Tachoka, tachoka tachoka (we are leaving, we are leaving, we are leaving).⁸³
(They all leave the shrine running and clapping their hands).

The moral significance of milawe

It will be noted that milawe is highly moralistic possibly because the form of spirit possession experienced by Bimbi at milawe is inspirational as different from the pathological and demoniacal forms of spirit possession. Social anthropologists have distinguished what they term "amoral" or "peripheral" spirits from "moral" or "central" spirits. The ancestral spirits are those which I.M. Lewis has termed "moral" or "central" spirits. These uphold morality and represent the ongoing interests of their descendants. They

"... stand at the centre of the stage in the religious life of society and play a crucial and direct role in sanctioning customary morality. In these circumstances possession may initially appear as a form of illness or trauma. Yet ultimately it is regarded as the mark of divine inspiration, the certain proof of the person's fitness for pursuing the religious vocation and the basis for the assumption of leading ritual roles and positions."⁸⁴

In view of the above discussion it seems safe to conclude that the spirits involved in milawe ceremony are the 'central' or 'moral' spirits. They are thus a vital force. As a mouthpiece of his ancestral spirits Bimbi is able to intervene in the social affairs of his people by appealing to the village

headmen and chiefs to redress their moral wrongs committed against the individual, the community, the ancestral spirits and Chauta as the ultimate moral force. The Bimbi's role, therefore, is to be the censor of society or guardian of traditional moral values in a society where these can be easily abused.

I.M. Lewis has indicated that this kind of spirit mediumship was also common among the Korekore people of Zimbabwe. He has observed that among the Korekore the shamans were concerned with the moral order and with the relations of man to earth. By interpreting the natural misfortunes such as drought or famine as consequences of breaks of moral order and in themselves a manifestation of the ancestral spirits' disapproval, the shaman in his mediumistic role acts as the censor of the society.⁸⁵ This, among other things, seems to be one of the crucial roles played by Bimbi.

We have also seen that milawe ceremony is concerned with social order in terms of a balance in the social relationships which create social cohesion and harmony. On the social plane Bimbi quite often attacks the evils of social injustice, the breaking of family and village taboos, the oppression of the weak by the politically powerful in traditional politics. He preaches unity, peace and brotherly love.

It must have been realised by now that milawe has also a political dimension. The Chewa in the Upper Shire Valley look upon themselves as a conquered social group by their more powerful neighbours - the Yao. It seems plausible to argue that milawe offers Bimbi and Chewa village headmen the opportunity to legitimise their land-charter as the first inhabitants of the area, therefore, 'children of the soil'. In this way they are able to attract some attention and self-respect. Lewis has pointed out that societies where central possession cults still persist are either composed of small fluid, social units exposed

to particular exacting physical conditions or conquered communities lying under the yoke of alien oppression. Thus as in peripheral cults where possession is believed to be a reaction of the weak against the powerful, the circumstances which lead to the ecstatic response where 'moral' or 'central' spirits are involved are:

"precisely those where men feel themselves constantly threatened by exacting pressures which they do not know how to combat or control, except through those heroic flights of ecstasy by which they seek to demonstrate that they are equal of the gods."⁸⁵

In economic terms milawe has a far reaching effect in the farming habits of the people in their traditional agricultural methods such as early planting, early weeding and hard working. One of the distinctive teachings of the Bimbi cult which comes throughout milawe is that work especially farming is a religious activity. God, man and the earth are three inseparable units meant to be in an everlasting harmony. Destabilisation in this united relationship is believed to bring about adverse effects in the farming economy and consequently jeopardise the life of the people. Thus farming, a mere secular economic activity, is viewed, through the eyes of the cult, as a form of religious participation in God's creative power of the world. This urge to take part in the creation of the world as evidenced in the process of procreation offers the people a meaningful purpose in life. Promises of good rain and good harvest give the participants in the Bimbi cult a sense of hope and orientation, at least in this physical plane in man's struggle for survival.

It must be noted that much of what Bimbi says at milawe is believed by the congregation who in turn broadcast it to the rest of the people in the areas

they come from. I.M. Lewis' analysis of spirit possession seems to indicate that ecstatic experiences are a social fact. According to him transcendental experiences typically conceived as states of possession give the person possessed a unique claim to direct experimental knowledge of the divine. Where and when this knowledge is socially recognised by others in society it gives the mystic the authority to act as a privileged channel of communication between man and the supernatural.⁸⁷ This seems to be in line with Beattie's and Middleton's view that the ideology underlying all mediumistic cults is that the mediumistic relationship with the realm of the spirits outside and beyond the control of men is thought to be particularly direct and close one, more so than can be achieved through other means such as sacrifice, prayer or the observation of omen.⁸⁸

Viewed in this way, therefore, it seems appropriate to conclude that the social impact of the Bimbi's transcendental experiences at milawe in a society whose needs he serves is based in the wider social recognition that the prophet himself enjoys.

CHAPTER 5

RITUALS PERFORMED BY THE PEOPLE

a Rain-calling ceremonies at Bimbi rain shrines

Attempts have been made in the previous chapters to show that among the Chewa and in the Bimbi cult in particular, rain is vital for their economy and that God is conceived mainly as 'The Rain-Giver'. The basic belief is that the Bimbi cult is an effective religious means to ward off adverse effects of drought. This is said to be achieved by means of prayer and offerings at the Bimbi rain shrines.

Rain calling ceremonies always follow after milawe. Bimbi insists that prayer and offerings have the power to change drought conditions and cause rain to fall. According to Bimbi all other means of fighting drought are sinful. Bimbi has it that offerings are important because they help people confess their sins in order for God to forgive them. Forgiveness is expressed in terms of the goodness of rain which God sends during or after prayers and offerings have been offered.¹

The starting point after milawe is the mobilisation of the people in all the villages concerned to prepare themselves for nsembe ya mvula (offering for rain) or nsunje, in their region. The village headmen responsible for this mobilisation set up small groups of people to collect maize, millet and cassava from each and every household involved in the villages in which the ceremony is going to take place. Each family is required, by tradition, to contribute a cob of maize (though in other cases two or even four cobs of maize can be donated), a handful of millet and some cassava. They also

contribute a penny from each household. This money is used for buying a piece of black cloth or white cloth depending on the prevailing circumstances. In most cases only a piece of black cloth is needed and as we have already seen it is called mtambo (the cloud).

All these things are stored in the chief's house or senior village headman's house preferably the cult figure himself. Besides, a log of firewood is collected from every household for purposes of making fire for the making of beer for the offering. According to Petro Mmaniwa the primary purpose for asking people to contribute in small quantities is to create a sense of collectiveness, incorporation and social unity. Each individual is made to feel that he is part and parcel of the total community and that the orderly functioning of the community requires that each and every individual should not be just a spectator but an active member in creating peace and order. Since no one is left out in this exercise feelings of an extended family are created and accentuated which cut across family, lineage and tribal affiliation and boundaries since the collection is done indiscriminately of family or tribal ties. The primary objective is to create a social equilibrium which is believed to cause a balance in the cosmic and spiritual forces.²

Once the maize has been collected and all the other necessary arrangements made, the maize is handed over to an elderly woman preferably a widow or any other old woman who is not sexually active. She is chosen by the cult leader himself. She is required to abstain from sexual intercourse during the whole period of beer making for offering for rain. She is asked to make chimela (malt). Chimela is often made of maize, millet and sorghum and used in fermenting mowa (locally made beer).

The grain is moistened in a basket or pot

and then allowed to sprout. This action is called kubviika chimela (to soak the malt). It is important to note that in the past only water from the chizimalupsya rains³ (first rains) was used for this purpose. These days, however, any type of water either from the rivers, well or lake is used. The water is drawn by young girls who have not yet reached puberty. They are assisted by the elderly, sexually inactive women.

It will be obvious by now that the choice of young girls and old women is intended to emphasise the notion of coolness, (kuzizila) and purity or innocence (kuyera mtima), which are essential for offerings made to God who is holy. These two groups of people are thought to be wozizila (cool) as against wotentha (hot) which is the case of those women who are sexually active, and would therefore, be the antithesis of coolness which induces rain.

When the grain has sprouted it is spread on a mat to dry with the green tails (about 2 to 3 inches) all twining together. The dry malt is kept safely until Bimbi gives the chief, village headman or cult figure the day on which the making of beer should commence.⁴ Once the date has been given the same woman who prepared chimela is asked to begin to make the beer. The woman leader and her team are said to be ali pa-nsembe (set apart for the offering) and are strictly forbidden to kulowa mnyumba (have sexual intercourse). This ensures the purity of the beer and thus heightens the hope that the ancestral spirits will receive the offering.

If by chance any of the women responsible in the making of the beer offering happens to break the sex taboo she reports to the chief, village headman or cult figure at once and asks permission to withdraw her pot of beer by saying that she has seen a 'dead rat in it'.⁵ Permission is normally granted. It is a common belief that the pots of beer of those

women, who believe that they cannot be found out after breaking the sex taboo, break in two when the beer is nearly ready. This, in itself, is taken as a sign of the ancestral spirits' disapproval of the sin of moral impurity. It is also taken as a form of punishment because the people involved become a laughing stock in the neighbourhood.⁶

Beer making for the offering is simple. The elder responsible makes fire outside her home while young girls draw water in small pots from the nearby well, river or lake. The water is emptied in a big pot or drum where it is mixed with cassava (matama) or maize flour. The young girls assist the elder woman to put the pot or drum on the fire to make the porridge necessary for the beer. The first day of beer making is called kulusula that is 'to boil' the porridge of the beer. The gruel itself is called mlusu (from lusula). Dried chimela is pounded in a mortar (mtondo) into flour and then added to mlusu when it is ready. It is left to stand overnight. In all cases chimela is pounded by either young girls or elderly women. On the second day mlusu is again boiled for six to eight hours until it is thoroughly cooked. This day is called tsiku lophika mowa (the day when mlusu is thoroughly boiled). On the third day it is left to stand and it can be drunk as sweet beer thobwa. On the fourth day more malt is pounded by the young girls for final fermentation of the beer. It is called tsiku losinjila mowa (the day in which great quantities of malt is pounded - kusinja). Final fermentation of the beer is done between 6.00pm and 3.00am.

This is the crucial day for mowa (beer) making. Its success - kukoma - or failure kuwawa or kunyungunya depends entirely on the skills of the brewer. Since there are no established capacity measurements the mixing of nganga (mlusu on the fourth day) and chimela is done by trial and error. To this

effect it is imperative that the people responsible for the making of the beer taste it all along as the process of mixing and fermenting proceeds until a quantitative balance between nganga and chimela is achieved. Balance is also achieved by transferring part of the contents of one pot into another pot and so on until a proper temperature is reached which induces successful fermentation. This can only be done by drinking a little bit of the beer and judging both its quality and temperature until an optimum balance has been acquired.

But unlike the beer brewed for commercial or purely social purposes which allow people to taste its quality and ensure its success, beer made for rain offering is never tasted. It is an anathema to taste it. The quality of the beer is determined by the ancestral spirits themselves from beginning to end. My informants pointed out that the beer is not tasted in order to avoid any form of human pride for its success, therefore, everything is left in the hands of the spirits. Another reason given was that if people drink it first before it has been offered to the spirits it destroys the objective of being a gift to the spirits and that as such it can only be given to them first in a spirit of true gift before any other person tastes of it.⁷

On the day of final fermentation three events take place. To start with announcements are made in all the villages concerned for the offering asking people to come to the shrine the following day. The day for the offering is declared a holiday and people are advised not to go and work in their gardens for it is the day set apart for the worship of Chauta. Sexual intercourse is forbidden the night before nsembe. It is said that in the past those people who broke this taboo were punished severely by poison ordeal because it indicated that they were witches.⁸

Secondly, on this day the elders rebuild or

build a new kachisi-wa-mvula (rain shrine) for the offering. Alexander Hetherwick has indicated that it is characteristic of the Chewa that when they make offerings to Mulungu they always build kachisi. This may be intended to distinguish between the offering made to God and that made purely to an ancestral spirit which can be carried out at a royal graveyard.⁹

Thirdly, on this day, Chewa royal graves,¹⁰ wherever this applies, are tidied up. A party of men and women with hoes in hand go to the royal graves and clear them of grass. They sweep all around and return home. This ritual is called kutsetsa kumanda kwa mfumu (to sweep the royal graveyard). The ritual of kutsetsa kumanda kwa mfumu (cleaning the royal graveyard) is highly symbolic. It is an act of contrition. The graveyard, seems to symbolise the village and its people. The grass appears to stand for all the moral and social disorders so common in social groups which cause social disruption and broods social discontent. By tidying the graveyard it seems, people are symbolically eradicating from their hearts the evils which lead to public immorality. As the weeds at the burying ground disfigure the appearance of the spirit-village, so in the social village things such as feuds, witchcraft, breaking of village and family taboos cause irregularities not only in the social order but also in the spiritual order thus causing natural disasters in the ecological sphere. This ritual action, it appears, is intended among other things, to underline not only the reality of the relationship between the living and the dead which require a harmonious flow of social intercourse but also the immortality of the human self which transcends physical death this being expressed in anthropomorphic terms for lack of better language. Thus symbolically the spirits eat and drink, get angry, reproach, chastise, appear in dreams and visit their relatives

Another concept which needs examination here is that of reconciliation. This theme pervades the whole of the Bimbi religious system and Chewa religion generally. Concomitant to this is the idea of peace which also forms the central part of the teaching of the Bimbi. According to James Atkinson embedded in the concept of reconciliation is the notion of atonement a word derived from the words 'at-one-ment' that is to make two parties at one, to reconcile two warring parties one to another.¹¹ The primary objectives of reconciliation is peace within the individual, the community and between these and the spiritual powers. James D. Dunn has indicated that the dominant meaning of the word peace is freedom from war 'that condition of a nation or community in which it is not at war with one another'. When used of individuals is said to mean 'freedom from disturbance or dissension and in spiritual terms it is intended to denote cessation of divine wrath, freedom from the disturbing sense of guilt or from inner turmoil.'¹² That peace is viewed as the prerequisite of a successful offering and the guarantee of a prosperous rainy season is clearly seen in the milawe which have been described above. Peace - mtendere - is, in the eyes of the Bimbi, inducive to prosperity and fecundity of the land hence of the total spiritual, social, economic and political growth of the society.

This requirement for reconciliation and peace will be appreciated when one notes that in a social setting such as that of the Upper Shire Valley where the Yao play the role of the victors and the Chewa the role of the vanquished, the political, social and economic interests of these two groups are often in conflict mainly when it comes to the question of land possession and use.

Land disputes are endemic at the inter-ethnic level between the Chewa who claim to have first settled down in the region and the Yao who claim ownership

of the land by conquest. But land disputes do also exist at intra-ethnic level between heads of villages and families over land possession or boundary disputes.

Besides, conflict exists at another level. The people of the Upper Shire strongly believe that many misfortunes such as drought, barrenness, crop failure, disease and above all death, are caused by the malevolence of witches (afiti). Social, economic and natural misfortunes are best understood and interpreted in terms of supernatural powers which the witches (afiti) tap for their own evil-inclined ambitions and jealousies causing too much suffering to other people in the community. Therefore, accusations and counter-accusations are endemic among the Chewa, Yao, Lomwe and Ngoni who live in the area. Furthermore, in a typical village setting succession disputes and inheritance, jealousy over those who are economically better off and the like are common place. It is common belief among the Chewa that all these strain social relationships and provoke the anger of the ancestral spirits. When the living-dead are angry it is as if God himself is angry since he does not want to see his children fighting,¹³ the disapproval of God and the ancestral spirits being expressed in the withdrawal of their support from the living and experienced by them in the form of disease, epidemics, drought, lightning, crop failure etc.

It is strongly believed that when people are in a state of war, offerings cannot be made for rain. They cannot be accepted. Hence warring factions within a family, village or territory are required to solve their differences, be united and once again live in peace.

The ritual of reconciliation as practised in the Bimbi cult and among the Chewa generally is simple. The warring factions are gathered before the chief or village headman at an assembly of elders.

The plaintiff airs out his grievances and his anger before the chief and the whole assembly of elders. It is a kind of public confession. The offender confesses that he is wrong and asks for forgiveness. It is a catharsis ritual. The chief or village headman advises the offended and offender to forget the past, forgive one another and lead a new life in which individual and group happiness must be subordinated to the well being of the total community. When agreement has been reached the party on the wrong side is asked to pay nkhuku (a chicken or small money as a sign of repentance) to the offended party. After this they are asked to drink water from the same cup (kumwera madzi chikho chimodzi) to seal their friendship of oneness and reassure the assembled elders that no evil will be done to one another.

Thus social, economic, and political tensions are eased out and people can go about freely in their daily life as a big extended family. In this way we see the Bimbi cult functioning as a truly territorial cult in respect of the well-being of the total community in all its social, political, economic and religious aspirations.

Offering for rain at Nyangu's rain shrine

During my field work I had the chance of participating in two offerings for rain. The first ritual of this kind took place on 13th January, 1985 in Kasenjera village five miles east of Kalembo township in Machinga district. The offering was led by Anubi Chipande Chekwenda who, as we have already seen, is one of the cult leaders in the area. What was important about this offering is the large number of people who attended it. More than two hundred people came to the ceremony comprising boys and girls, men and women aged between 9 and 70 years. Again it was a mixed congregation comprising christians,

muslims and 'traditionalists'. All this appeared to me to indicate that the Bimbi cult is still a vital religious power capable of drawing support from young and old and christians and muslims alike.

The second rain-calling ceremony, and which I propose to examine in this chapter, took place on 20th January, 1985 in Mmaniwa village a mile south of Kalembo township. As we have already seen, village headman Mmaniwa is the guardian and priest of the rain shrine in the Ulongwe forest commonly known as kachisi-wa-Nyangu and it is under the patronage of chief Kalembo.¹⁴ After the milawe ceremony of 17th November, Petro Mmaniwa caused maize and other foodstuffs to be collected together with some firewood a log from every family. The maize was collected from the following villages: Mmaniwa, Mkanda, Tsapa, Matukuta, Kabiyo, Hoba, Suga, Chimdikiti and Mphezeni. It is interesting to note that many of these such as Chimdikiti, Suga, Hoba and Kabiyo are Ngoni village headmen.

The task of preparing the sacrificial beer was entrusted to Merina James, Petro Mmaniwa's mother. Mmaniwa himself and his mother are christians and church goers. One of the chief elements of this offering was the involvement of chief Kalembo, the traditional Yao political authority in the area. Chief Kalembo was represented by one of his chief councillors, Group village headman Mpango. As we have already seen,¹⁵ Mpango is a well known politician in the politico-religious affairs of Kalembo'ship. Chief Kalembo in the person of village headman Mpango gave orders that preparations be made for the offering according to the mandate given to him from Bimbi in the person of village headman Mmaniwa. On Kalembo's side beer was made in Mpango's village.

The immediate cause for the offering was to stop the rain coming from the north (mvula ya mpoto)

and to ask for the rain coming from the east (mvula ya vuma). But apart from this, the offering was again a fulfilment of the traditional requirements that during the rainy season offerings be made at all the shrines within the heartland of the Bimbi cult.

I arrived in Mmaniwa village at 7.15am to take part in the ceremony that followed. The ceremony involved two processions one from Mpango village led by Mpango wadi Msilo representing chief Kalembo and the Yao section of the community and another from Mmaniwa village led by Petro Mmaniwa representing the Chewa section of the community. The Ngoni were represented by village headman Chimdikiti. The two processions would then meet a short distance from the shrine and there after they would proceed jointly.

By 7.30am people began to congregate in Mmaniwa village. A group of young girls aged between 9 and 12 years were assembled ready for the ceremony. They were dressed in assorted colours other than white and red up to the waist leaving their breasts bare. According to Petro Mmaniwa the girls were dressed half way up in order to show their size and age so that men cannot have bad thoughts about them such as to have sexual intercourse with them.¹⁶ Beer was put in small pots to be carried by the girls. At 8.30am the procession from Mmaniwa's village began. Mmaniwa's rain shrine draws together a number of socio-political groups - Chewa, Yao, Lomwe and Ngoni. In addition to the beer which was carried by six young girls, sand was also collected from Nkasi River in plates by three girls.

Quite often when an offering is to be made in the forest a shrine is built or rebuilt the day before by village headman Mwalero and his men. This time, however, there was no need to build a new shrine since the old one was still standing. The surroundings of the shrine were carefully cleared. The participants in the procession comprised men, women, boys and girls.

Shortly afterwards Mmaniwa's procession joined Mpango's procession six hundred yards from the shrine. The approach to the shrine was done in a dignified manner, The elders took their shirts and hats off and the women wore their clothes up to the waist. In front of the congregation there was village headman Mmaniwa, the owner of the shrine and representing the Chewa the 'first' inhabitants of the area. They are as it were the conquered people. Behind him came Group village headman Mpango representing chief Kalembo and the Yao section of the community. They are the conquerors. Behind him still came village headman Chimdikiti representing the Ngoni. He was followed by village headman Mkanda another important Chewa figure. Behind them all came the nine girls six of them bearing small pots of beer and three bearing three plates of sand. Then all the congregation of about eighty people followed. It was a solemn march. Scholars have pointed out that in the history of social ritual the procession occupies an important place. Great religious significance is attached on what is, in the first instance, merely the act of moving the body from one place to another with solemnity or in accordance with the emotions expressed by the purpose of the movement. Similarly, the return home is of ceremonial character - a recession. To this effect using the term worship in the wide sense of all solemn social action, procession may be regarded as being in itself an act of worship.¹⁷

When we were 50 yards away from the shrine Mmaniwa started clapping hands saying:

Ichotu icho (may we come in)

Ichotu icho (may we come in)

He was saying this as he was moving towards the shrine. With these words he was seeking admittance from the ancestral spirits. Then when we reached the

shrine, Mmaniwa, Mpango, and Chimdikiti went inside the shrine and knelt on the floor of the shrine turning northwards. At this particular occasion it was intended to placate the ancestral spirits to stop the rain coming from the north. A small shallow hole had been made on the northern section of the shrine where the offering was to be poured to coincide with the northern wind. Outside the kachisi on the roof there was a piece of black cloth spread over it. It was torn into small pieces in order to prevent people from stealing it. All the people outside sat down around the shrine. When everybody had sat down, the sand was passed on to Mmaniwa. He spread it (kumwalamwalaza) slowly on the floor of the kachisi. Three plates of sand (mchenga) was used for this purpose. There are different interpretations as to why sand is used. According to Merina James, sand is spread on the floor of the shrine in order to make it tidy.¹⁸ Petro Mmaniwa and Mkanga Maganga, however, hold that sand is used as a symbol of matalila a mvula (strong rain).¹⁹ Ian Linden has indicated that according to Mbuzimaere the reason for spreading the sand over the bottom of the shrine was to give Thunga (snake-spirit) a cool moist place.²⁰

After the spreading of the sand had been done, the ritual of beer offering began. The act of offering itself is called kutsira nsembe that is to 'pour out' and it is pregnant with deeper religious meaning. As God pours out his life to man through the gifts given to him in nature so man, in a sense, pours himself out in supplication and prayer to God in his action of pouring out the sacrificial beer. The fact that beer, a food item is offered other than just saying prayers, is significant here. J.S. Ukpong in his study of sacrificial worship in Ibibio traditional religion observes that:

"The significance of offering food items in sacrifice is to be understood

in the context of the socio-economic life of the Ibibio who are primarily farmers and for whom animals and food items are commonly exchanged and valued as gifts among close friends. In sacrifice, therefore, the offering of food items and animals expresses friendship with the invisible beings worshipped."²¹

As regards beer offering in Bimbi worship to the divinity my informants unanimously asserted that this is a symbol of rain (water). It is poured on the hole in order to make the earth cool and wet as if it had been rained upon by the desired rain.²² The logic of this seems to be that the desired goal through being dramatised, becomes readily accessible, almost as if once a pictorial hint is given to nature it might be hard to erase it.²³ But apart from being a symbol of rain the beer so offered is intended to be food for the spirits in the spirit world. This is, of course, symbolic and the people who engage in the actions of kutsira nsembe do not literally believe that the spirits in their nature as spirits are able to partake of the actual substance of the beer. The whole process of giving and receiving of the beer is symbolic. The preference of offering beer is said to be that many of the ancestral spirits were fond of beer and since beer fosters great social interaction between people creates social ties even where they never existed before.

Once Petro Mmaniwa had taken the proper position for the offering (kneeling and leaning forward) beer was passed to him in a calabash. He received it and poured the beer in the hole of offering praying each time beer was poured and mentioning the names of his ancestral spirits as far as his mind could go. As he was saying his prayer people were punctuating it with the words PEPAA meaning PARDON. It should be noted that although in his prayer and in all the other prayers that follow the main concern is on good-rain,

good health and a plentiful supply of food, these and any other material blessings prayed for, have a far reaching spiritual dimension since they point to the world beyond this world, to the world of Chauta where everything has its source. As Edwin Smith has argued "in the symbolism of the Africans there is much that emphasises their conviction that desirable ends of material nature are also, and intrinsically, ends of spiritual or mystical nature."²⁴ From this point of view, it seems plausible to suggest that when people pray for rain they, in fact, aspire not only for the material good mentioned but also for spiritual well-being as well. I have indicated above that as beer offering is poured a prayer is said over it. The following prayer was uttered by Mmaniwa as people gently clapped their hands in unison. He prayed thus:

Ichho icho icho
Ichho icho icho

May we come in
May we come in

Oh Ambuye ndabwera
Ndabwera ine mwana wanu
Amene ndatsala kusonga
mdziko la pansi
Ndabwera kudzakuwonani
ndi kudzakudandaulirani
mdziko mwathu muno

My grandfather, I have come
I have come I, your child
the remnant of the elders
in this world
I have come to see you
and to tell you my grievances
in this land of ours.

Choyamba mutithandize
Ambuye Chauta, Namalenga

kuti mutithandize
kutinvera ku maina
amene sitichule pano
kuti mdziko mwathu muno
tikhale wogwirizana
ndithu

First of all help us
Lord Chauta (Big Bow),
Namalenga (Creator)
Please, help us
to hear us through the names
which we will mention here
that in this land of ours
we should be united

Muchotse zinunkhadala
zoononga mbeu
mphambe zitsakhalepo
chaka chino
zoononga anthu
Mkuntho, mvula ya mphepo
isakhalepo
yoononga chuma cha
wanthu

Remove zinunkhadala (insects)
these destroy people's crops
Let there be no lightning
this year
they destroy people
Let there be no whirl-wind
and windy rain
they destroy people's property

Ambuye Chauta, Namalenga
mutithandize ku mauwa
kuti mutipatse kwa
maina
ya wanthu amene tachula
kuti zonse zimene
zikhale zogwirizana
pa umodzi

Lord Chauta, Namalenga (God)
Help us as we have prayed
grant us through the names
of the people mentioned here
that in everything
we should be united

After Mmaniwa said this prayer, he asked Mpango to say his prayer on behalf of the chief and of the Kalembo chiefdom as a whole. He prayed in the following manner:

Kuti uwe tuiche akuno
Nambo yakuichila ni ya
makolo
Uwe nginituwa kusintha,
kuleka
Tuiche akuno ku ngalango

kwa a Nyangu
Yeleyo ni tuichile akuno

kuti alinje
kutikamuchisya

Achino chaka achino
tuimanyilile kuti
Mlungu atupele ula
jambone
Jangali lyuwa

Nambo tikudandaula
Atupele mpoto

Mpoto ukononga imanga

Yaka mpoto mwatupaga

mndawi jakutauna imanga

niyeleyo netikuisimonga
imanga nikuumulaga
ula ichinyaga
Netikuimanyilila kuti
mwelemo mwana kapuche

We have come here
we have come to follow the
old traditions
we cannot change or give
up
we have come here at the
forest
at Nyangu's place
this is what we have come
here for
that you should, please,
help us

We know that this year
God has given us good rain
there is no prolonged dry
weather
But we have a grievance
He has given us rain from
the north
the northern rain destroys
maize
in the past you gave us the
northern rain
when people began to eat
their fresh maize
We are puzzled
How come the maize is drying
while it is still raining
Thus we know
there is kapuche (insects)
in it

Yeleyo alinje
kututyochesya
Ambuje che Mmaniwa
ne asyene ngalango jino

ja atate wao che Nyangu
Alinje kutikhululuchila
A Nyangu
A Mkulukutwa
A Sakasaka
A Thombolombo
A Mtangaluwembe
Alinje kutukamulila we
mwanjawo
akuika ndi ngondo
Ngondo jikaika

Mbungo tijimalisye imanga
yele ngitukuisaka
njazi alinje kutukamulila
nambi yeleyo ngati ne
ikononga wandu

Uwe nekuti choonde
alinje kutitondoya
ula tikujisaka
Awu utendeu tuiche
apano pano
lero jino
Kalako nemwatujitikaga
pakutyoka apano pano
tunyowile
Yeleyo uwe nitikuisosa

Ikawa yamti
awu utajeu
soni nikutenda lagalu
ula ngawoneka iai
Nambi uwe ati nekuti
Nambi tujaulileje
kuja kutindiwala ku
ngalango
ana ngati tujileje
kuwenda
uti pane Mlungu
tatukamuchisye

Please try to take that
away
Lord Mmaniwa
he is the owner of this
shrine
It is Nyangu's, his father
Please, forgive us
You, Nyangu
Mkulukutwa
Sakasaka
Thombolombo
Mtangaluwembe
try to control that one
he is coming to wage war
Let there be no war

The wind is going to destroy
the maize
we do not want that to happen
lightning, please, control
that as well
for that destroys people.

As for ourselves we say
please,
try to comfort us
we want rain
Thus we have come here, right
here
this very day
in the past you answered our
prayers
we used to leave this place
soaking wet
we want that very thing to
happen
It should not be that
having made this offering
then it dries up
no rain to be seen anywhere
and we only left to say
why did we go
to kneel in prayer in the
forest?
did we not go to beg
that perhaps God will help
us?

Achino chaka achino wandu atawidwe makono nekuti uwe yeleyo mwachinsyene nginimwagopola wandu Mwagopole	This very year people have their hands bound up thus we say this is your doing you have not set your people free Set them free
Uwe mesitu ngitukugandaula kuti ana nambi mesi ngati ne ula? yeleyo alinje kutukamuchisya Ulajo jikawa jakatichisya Wandu kulaga iai	We have no worries when we see water for is not rain made of water? Please, try to help us with that Let not the rain be insufficient Let people not suffer
Ambuje a Mchinjika Uwe tuiche kungalango akuno Ambuje che Kalembo Tuiche kungalango akuno Tujisumene ngalango ja a Nyangu Ni mkujitetesya kuti Jikawa jakupya ni moto Jikawa jakata wandu itela	My Lord Mchinjika we have come here at the forest My Lord Kalembo we have come here at the forest we found Nyangu's forest here you offer it protection it should not be destroyed by fire and people should not cut down trees here
Yeleyo uwe tikupunda kondwa nayo Ambuje ku-Msamala Che Chingwalu-ngawalu Wesope atame mkongo atupe ula Uwe tikuti petutyoché apano Ata tunyowe tutukalagale ngawa yamti kuika akuno kuno tukataje msunje soni nikutipa luwa, iai Nambo atupe ula atupe ula wandu mitima jiwe mmalo kuti Mlungu chaka achino atupele ula jambone	We are overjoyed because of that care My Lord Mtsamala Chingwalu-ngwalu you should all take council together give us rain we say, when we leave, this place Even if we do get wet, we will get dry not that coming here to make this offering then you gives us a spell of dry weather, oh NO! But give us rain give us rain so that people can have their hearts at rest. that God has this year given us good rain

Pangali iwawisile Mlungu	There is nothing which was not set up by God
Mlungu wawisile atsogoleri	God set up leaders
Wawisile Yesu ni kumuika Mtume	He appointed Jesus and Mohamed
Yeleyo nikuika	these were his captains
achikapitawo wakwendajenda	those whom he sent about as messengers
nekuti choonde alinje	Please, please, try to help us
kutukamuchisya	We do not have much to say
Ngintuwa wa malowe	all of you
gamajinji iai	whom we have forgotten we the young ones
wesope wane	do not say: 'we have been forgotten'
timliwalile uwe	just gather together
wakusonga	
ne ngati atuliwalile	
nekwamba kusonganganila	
pa mpepe	
kasatumbila iai	do not show your anger upon us
Malowe negetukuwechetaga	what we ask is this
kuti choondemlinje	please, try
kutukamuchisya uwe ula	to help us with some rain
nekuti pele titiujeje	let us leave this place
akuno	
ne ula jakwe	with rain
Yeleyo netikuisosa	that is what we want
kuti pele titutyoché apano	from here
tikuja ku msoro ku	we are going to the shrine
Linga	at Linga
kwa Ambuje a	to my grandfather
Chingwalungwalu	Chingwalungwalu.

When Mpango finished saying his prayer, Chimdikiti the Ngoni village headman representing Ngoni interests, was called upon by Mmaniwa to say his prayer. He prayed thus:

Iai ine ndilibe mau	No, I do not have much to say
ambili	out here there is Mmaniwa
kunja kuno a Mmaniwa	He is our priest
ndiye amene ali wothila	
msembe	
mwa ife	among us
Ndiye akathila nsembe	when an offering has been made
koma Kunjakutu kuli	but outside here there is
menya, nguluwe	war, pigs

komano mutsatipatse mvula ya motoyi Yabomba ii mukutipatsai mutipatse mvula yatsopano yodziziritsa chimanga kuti chimanga chibale bwino monga chaka chathachi munatipatsa mvula yabwino komatu mpoto amkatsirizira	do not give us this fire- like rain this is a bomb-like rain give us new rain which cools down the maize so that the maize can bear good fruit as it was last year you gave us good rain the northern rain came at the end
Inu a Nyangu A Mkulukutwa A Sokopio muuzane bwino	You, Nyangu Mkulukutwa Sokopio confer together in our favour
Kunja kunali a Mpango Kunja a Chingwalungwalu	out here there was Mpango out there there was Chingwalungwalu
Kunja a Chimdikiti	out here there was Chimdikiti
A Hoba Muuzane bwino	there was Hoba confer together in our favour
kuti ana anu asasauke	that your children should not suffer
A ku-Mkanda uku A Kalonga Akubanda ndiye ife ana anu tabwera kudzakudandaulirani tikusanza zimene mumkachita kale makolo Chifukwa mukadzati anawa akutiiwala Koma sitikuiwala iaai zakale mzakale zimene mumkachita	there was Mkanda there Kalonga Akubanda we your children have come to beseech you We are following what you our ancestors did before, For you will say, these children have forgotten us we are not forgetful old things are old things what you were doing in the past
ndi zimene tikuchita ife lero ndiye mutiyendechele bwino mvula kuti anthu asakhale akusau-sauka Koma akhale a mtendere monga mmene adachita chaka chino sadamka nafuma ai	that is what we do today so govern the affairs of the rain in our favour that people should not be in suffering after suffering but they should live in peace, as they were this year
chimene chafiilachi chiyenele kubeleka bwino Nkholookwa tadya	they did not go about looking for food this yellowish maize let it bear good fruit the little maize we had we have eaten
ndilibe mau ambili mau anga ndi womwewo	I have no much to say these are my words, I have spoken.

When Village headman Chimdikiti finished his prayer, it was the turn of village headman Mkanda also to say his prayer for the people. He said:

Malowe ni gagogo
awelechete
Ambuje che Mpango
kuti uwe tukwamba
kutogolera
kuti yeleyi ai choonde

alinje kutijitika
kutandila wosepene
achambuje wetu wampite

aDanga mwelemo
kuti mkalinjile
kutipembecheya
Indu ai
mpoto alinje katika
kuti kapena Mlungujo
atukamuchisye
kuti kapena tupate
chakulya
mwacheso ata twalasile
nambo ai twasechelele

Nambi chaka achino chino
nekuleka soni
ngasechelela?
Tusechelele
chisawituatesile
chaka chimasile
kuikapelepo ambuje
une mgomile
juwangali malowe
gamajinji

What I would say has
already been said
by my Lord Mpango
that we are most grateful

that in all these things,
please,
try to help us
Beginning with all of you
our ancestors who have gone
before us
including you Danga
please, intercede for us

these things
let the northern rain stop
that perhaps God will
help us
that we may have some
food
last year though we suffered
we, however, rejoiced.

much more this year
should we not rejoice
again?
let's rejoice as we did

last year
Thus much Lord I have
spoken
I do not have much to
say.

When Mkanda finished saying his prayer, village headman Mmaniwa was called upon by Mpango to say the closing prayer. Mpango told Mmaniwa that if by chance they happened to forget names of other ancestral spirits he should not worry since they themselves would invite one another to the offering whether or not they had been mentioned by name.

But before Mmaniwa said the closing prayer, masese (sediments of beer) which had been brought to the shrine were sprinkled and scattered around and under a baobab tree ten yards away from the kachiši. My

informants told me that they did this because some of the ancestral spirits during their life time used to like eating masese and not the beer proper. When masese had been scattered round the tree, Mmaniwa said the closing prayer. He prayed thus:

"EEE tikuti zikomo
kwambiri Ambuye
Koma wodandaulawa ndi
amenewa
Ndabwera nawo
kudzagubuduka
Ine mwana wanu ndabwera
ndi maliro anga,
kukulilirani
Kuti Ambuye a Chauta, a
Namalenga
kumwamba muthandizane
nawo
Ndipo akuthandizeninso
Ifenso mutithandize
pansi pano
Za mau ena ambiri
ndi amene ndalankhula aja

Chachikulu mutichitile
chisoni
kwa ife ana wotsala pansi

kuti tisalandiledi vuto
ai
Mchaka chathachi
Ingakhale tikadanena

ka ufulu kadalipo
nde pano tikudandaula

mphepo ya Mpoto
ikubwerayi nanga
A inetu ndikatero apo
Ambuye
ndithu chachikuru
mungogwirapo
Chichewa chimene
takambapo
Kuti tikatero pano
taimira pamenepo
Zonse zimene
mukatikonzere
ndi inuyo pamodzi ndi
Ambuye Chauta

Yes we say thank you very
much Lord
these are the people who
have a grievance
I have come with them to
humble ourselves
I, your child, have come
mourning for help

That Lord Chauta,
Namalenga
there in heaven to help them
and they to help you
Help us as well here on
earth
I have nothing much to say
are those which I have
already spoken
First and foremost have
mercy on us
children who have remained
in this world
that we should not be in
trouble
this last year
no matter how much we would
say
there was freedom
Here we are raising our
cry to you
Why do we see the northern
wind coming?
Well, thus far Lord

just hearken

Chichewa we have spoken

Thus far
I have stopped here
Do us favour in everything
we have said
You together with Our Lord
Chauta.

When Mmaniwa's prayer was over, we were made to lie flat on our backs on the ground with eyes turned skywards. Then while in this position we were asked to sit and lie down three times clapping hands and saying.

Gona, gona, gona	lie down, lie down, lie down
Uka, uka, uka	sit, sit, sit.

Then when the ritual of sitting and lying on the ground was over we were asked to roll ourselves on the ground once to the left then to the right and to the left again. This action is called kugalagata (to roll on the ground). According to Chekwenda both the lying and rolling on the floor of the earth is an act of humility (kudzichepetsa) before Mulungu. He said to me: "We want to show God that we are nothing but dust". It was also an act of contrition (kudandaula mu mtima chifukwa cha machimo) to show God that "we are sorry that we and our brothers and sisters have committed greivous sin (uchimo waukulu).²⁵ One of my informants, abiti Chaima Asimanye Wandu, put it this way:

"We roll on the ground with the objective of asking Mulungu, with a humble heart (mtima wozichepetsa) to help us, as a dog does in front of its master (monga mmene galu amachitira ndi ambuye wache)."

The clapping of hands was also explained as a means of asking for forgiveness and of giving respect to the ancestors.²⁶

When this ritual was over, Mmaniwa started a song of worship titled 'TILAMBE' ("WORSHIP"). It was sung by all of us present at the ceremony. During the singing we were lying flat on our backs with our eyes turned skywards. We clapped hands as we sung, in worship.

Leader: Tilambe tilambe kwacha (let us worship,
 let us worship,
 this day)

Chorus: Tilambe tilambe kwacha (let us worship,
 let us worship,
 this day)

After this song was sung for about five minutes Mmaniwa ordered that we should drink the rest of the beer there at the kachisi. The beer was shared out to everyone present even to those who do not drink beer.

When the ceremony of beer drinking was over (a kind of communion with the spirits) at the kachisi, Mmaniwa bade farewell to the spirits in these words:

"Zikomo, zikomo tikupita takusiyani (thank
you we are now leaving)
Zikomo, zikomo takusiyani (thank you, thank
you we are leaving)

At the end of the ceremony we adjourned to the village about a mile away. We were singing rain songs as we receded. We sung thus:

Leader:	Ndi aka ndi aka	This tiny one, this tiny one
	Ndi aka ndi aka	This tiny one, this tiny one

Chorus: Kamtambo the tiny cloud

Leader: Kokolo-kokolo mvula It is cloudy, it will
lero rain today

Chorus: Kaloole Rain come

When we reached Mmaniwa's village our party was greeted with great excitement. People sang rain songs, ululating and rejoicing that the offering had been made. Beer was served to more than three hundred

people who had gathered in the village after church services during our absence. The number of people grew as the day wore on. Women performed a rain dance in a ring clapping their hands and splashing water in the sky at the accompaniment of a drum. During the rain dance people sung many songs intended to bring the rain down although this was not the objective of the ceremony that day. Some of the songs they sang were as follows:

- | | | |
|---------|--|---|
| 1 | <u>TIPATSENI MADZI</u> | <u>GIVE US WATER</u> |
| Leader: | Tipatseni madzi
ku mmelo kwauma | Please, give us water
our throats are dry |
| Chorus: | Kaloole | rain come |
| Leader: | Kowe eee kowe | pull it down, pull it down |
| Chorus: | Kaloole | rain come |
| 2 | <u>TIUKOKE MTAMBO</u> | <u>LET'S PULL THE CLOUD</u> |
| Leader: | Tiukoke mtambo
tiukoke mtambo
pakati pa nyanja | Let's pull the cloud
let's pull the cloud
from the lake |
| Chorus: | Tiukokeyee tiukokeyee
pakati pa nyanja | Let's pull it, let's pull it
from the lake |
| 3 | <u>TIULONDE MTAMBO</u> | <u>LET'S FOLLOW THE CLOUD</u> |
| Leader: | Tiulonde mtambo eee
tiulonde eee
mvula lero | Let's follow the cloud
let's follow it
there will be rain today |
| Chorus: | Tiulondeeee
tiulondeeee
mvula lero | Let's follow it
let's follow it
there will be rain today. |

After the rain dance was over people retired to their respective villages hoping that God received their prayers.

It is important to note that there are some additional ceremonies at other Bimbi shrines where royal graves are involved. At village headman Mmanga, for example, prayers for rain do not end at the shrine but at the graveyard of village headman Mmanga I. When the elders leave the rain shrine and go to the

graveyard of the first Mmanga, they smear ashes and mud on one another and keep on doing this until they reach the grave. Once there the living Mmanga sprinkles the grave with water and the people sprinkle water on one another. This is accompanied with a prayer. The smearing of ashes and mud on one another also takes place in the village in the excitement of the rain dance. Werner has suggested that the smearing of ashes and mud during a sacrifice for rain is to show that people want to wash in the rain.²⁷ But it can also be added that these are symbols of repentance and the people's acknowledgement of their dependence on the spiritual beings' good will.

Another example can be drawn in the manner in which offerings at Mpinganjira shrine are concluded. According to Mwalabu Sumani Mpinganjira, after leaving the shrine everyone sings whatever song he or she likes returning to the village. Then people insult one another (amatukwanizana za nsalu ali kunyadila). No one gets angry because they are all over excited (zimakhala zopanda milandu). People rejoice because of the offering (anthu amasekera). From the shrine people divide into small groups and sing 'Tilambe, tilambe kwacha' (let's worship today). These small groups scatter round about to all Chewa royal graves singing as they go along. When they reach there they lie on the floor near the grave and roll themselves this side and that side making themselves very dirty (amazigalautsa) to show the royal spirits that they are extremely sorry for their sins. One of the royal graves they visit is that of Mpinganjira-wa-Ndodo. This ceremony turns into a big feast and great excitement. People hope that Mulungu will help them.²⁸

Religious and sociological significance of offerings for rain

Offerings for rain in the Bimbi cult such as

to put the ancestral spirits in the forefront in their approach to God, God, however, forms the central part of the system. God is worshipped, the ancestral spirits are venerated. Admittedly the irregularity with which corporate or group rituals take place, and the emphasis put on the mediatory role of the ancestral spirits, who are both loved and feared, tend to make it difficult to distinguish where pure ancestor veneration ends and where God worship begins. It is, however, plausible to assume that even in those religious rituals which the participants comprehend as purely ancestor-oriented the latent function of such gatherings seems to be a desperate search to commune with God and a search for answers to the ultimate problems of their existence.

It should be noted that the anatomy of God-worship in the Bimbi cult is characterised by sacrifices and offerings in the form of food items consonant with the intentions of the worshipping community in accordance with their needs, based on the conviction that worship to a deity does not consist only of words but above all in offering something dear to the worshipper which he denies himself in favour of his God which is, in a sense, another form of renunciation and self-mortification. With this in mind it is safe to assume that sacrifices and prayers in the Bimbi cult are attempts by the people to communicate themselves with God in action, word and thought thus forming a fundamental aspect of worship.

That worship of God is the focal point of the ritual offerings carried out at Bimbi rain shrines is reflected in some of the prayers said at such occasions. The following prayer said at Changunda rain shrine is very revealing. There the officiating elder, Francisco Dickson reverently kneels before the shrine and utters his prayer beseeching God to help. He prays thus:

"Tafika ife Chauta
 Kudzagwada patsinde pa
 mtengo uwu
 kutsira nsembe ya kwa
 inu
 kuti munvere chidandaulo
 chathu cha ife
 kunja kwauma
 ndiye mutinvere
 kusade kusade
 kumwambaku tumizani
 mitambo yanu
 kuti ifeyo tilandile
 chinyonho chochokela
 mdzanja lanu
 kudandaula kwatu
 konse kuthe
 mukuwone inu
 zolira zathu zonse
 basi tatha ife
 tiyangana kwa inu
 chimene muti
 mutichitire
 inu a Mpambe a Chauta

Chauta (God) we have come
 To kneel before this
 tree
 to make this offering
 to you
 that you may hear the cry
 from us
 the earth out here is dry
 please, hear our prayers
 Do not let the sun go down
 send there on the sky
 your clouds
 that we may receive
 the moisture from your
 hands
 our cry
 should come to an end
 look at our suffering
 and all our ills
 we have nothing much to say
 we look for you
 to see what you will do to
 help us
 You Mphambe, You Chauta.³⁰

Offerings as means of confession of sins

Another religious significance of the offerings in the Bimbi cult is that they have an aspect of public confession of sins (kupepetsa ndi kuchosa machimo). The Chewa as a people are conscious that man is a sinner in relation to God and that man is always inclined to doing evil. God is considered as absolutely holy and that he hates sin and he is swift to punish the sins of man. The ancestral spirits, in their priestly role, are thought to have a higher moral standing than man because of their proximity to God. They are in fact called aku-Mlungu (those who are with God). Having been liberated from the hindrances of the physical world they are considered as having attained or in the process of attaining moral perfection as they come closer and closer to God. It is, therefore, common belief among the Chewa and in the Bimbi cult in particular that God's punishment upon those who have transgressed his moral law is administered through these ancestral spirits

and is made manifest by such things as disease, death, drought, famine and other natural and social disasters. These are signs that God is displeased and that the sinner or the sinful community must repent and be forgiven. Sin is conceived both as a wrong committed against one's neighbour and the community at large or directly against God mainly when people fail to give worship due to him and forget that they are dependent on him. One of the rain songs sung at Changunda village is reflective of the idea that sometimes there is drought because people have sinned against God (kwatukwana a Chauta). They sing thus:

Njala ya makono	This year's famine
pachipanda kachele	if we had no fig-tree
	fruits to eat
Eae eae	we would have died
Mwatukwana a Chauta eee	You have sinned against
	Chauta (God)
Simuiwona Mvula	You will not see the rain
Njala ya makono	This year's famine
Pachipanda kachele	if we had no fig-tree
	fruits to eat
Eae, Eae	we would have died. ³¹

Thus at Balamanja shrine, again, after mentioning all the names of the ancestral spirits the officiating elder utters the following confessional prayer on behalf of the people in the following words:

Inu nonse a ku-mizimu	To you all in the spirit
Amene takuchulani pano	world
tsopano	those of you whom we have
ngati takuchimwilani	mentioned here
	If we have sinned against
kuti mvula isagwe	you
	and have caused the rain
	not to come
choonde mutikhululukire	please, forgive us
Mutipemphelele kwa Chauta,	Pray to Chauta,
Mphambe, Chisumphu,	Mphambe, Chisumphu,
Namalenga	Namalenga, for us

Mwamba-mwambamo
kuti atitsisire mvula

there in the heavens
that he may send down some
rain.³²

Offerings as a means of entering in communion with
the spirit world

The Chewa strongly believe that their social, political and economic life is constantly impinging in the spiritual order as set by God and that any imbalance caused by misconduct on the part of man calls for repentance and amendment of the social wrongs committed.

To achieve this the Chewa make offerings to the deity in order to establish right relationships with God thus establishing communion between the spirit world and the physical world. In the process social solidarity is enhanced as people go about regulating abnormalities in society which are believed to cause tensions between the spirit world and the physical world.

Offerings can thus be looked upon as normative institutions for they establish a normal flow of intercourse and a sense of bond not only between individuals and communities but also between the worshipper and the spiritual powers with which the community wants to be at peace and in harmony.

Since in a communal sacrifice everyone is expected to contribute food in terms of maize, cassava, sorghum or other foodstuffs it requires a high degree of co-operation. Preparation for this normally takes weeks. Because of the scale of the offering, the length of time it takes, the great number of people involved and the high degree of harmony demanded for a successful offering, people are placed in such a position that consciously or unconsciously they bury their differences, repair their broken relationships and become one. This unity of purpose and the need to achieve it creates

in the minds of the participants a sense of brotherhood, as one body, a feeling which lingers on even after the sacrificial ritual is over. This sense of friendship is cemented at the communal drink of the beer offering before the spiritual beings at the shrines. In this way order, peace, stability, unity and harmony are established and maintained both at the spiritual and physical levels.

Offerings as a gift of thanksgiving

It should also be noted that offerings in the Bimbi cult may have a religious significance of a gift of thanksgiving. Offerings are made to Mulungu with the intention of seeking his favours based on the belief that God is king (Mulungu ndi mfumu) and as such has power over life and death. God is considered as the creator of all and the giver of every possible blessing spiritual as well as material. He has the power to give life to man and to withhold it. He is exceedingly generous and benevolent filling his people with material goods for as long as they are in a right relationship with him here and now. Because of this God deserves to be honoured. Since one cannot appear before a great chief empty handed, much more one cannot appear before God without a gift in terms of flour, sweet beer etc., as a symbol of homage and recognition of God's providential love.

This aspect of gift-offering is prominent in the thanks offerings of the first fruits as practised at Bimbi rain shrines. Bimbi always insists that the first fruits must first be offered to God before they are given for secular consumption both as a gift and thanksgiving. The best example of this aspect of offering is that recounted to me by village headman Balamanja. He described his experiences in this way:

"Here before harvest takes place we consecrate the maize to Chauta. When the rain come and the people have maize in their gardens and it is nearly ripe I go from village to village and from house to house telling people not to touch it. When the maize is ripe I summon all the families to my bwalo (court yard) and tell them to bring to me a cob of maize. I tell them,

'We must now thank Chauta to whom we knelt in prayer asking him to give us rain'.

So all the families bring here a cob of maize from each of their gardens. When it is brought here we cook it in big pots. After it has been cooked we take it to the shrine late in the evening and I say a prayer over it. I pray thus:

"A ku-Mlungu	You in God's world
wonani chimanga ichi	See the maize is here
dzana lija	yesterday we came here
tinapempha mvula	to ask for rain
Tikuthokozani	thank you for
mwatipatsa mvula	giving us rain
ife ndife wana	we are your
wanu	children
Tsopano mmene	now that you have
mwatipatsa	given us
mvula muja	the rain
zakudya zawoneka	we have food enough
wonani nkhope	see how happy our
zathu zokondwa	faces are
Tengani chimanga	take this maize
ichi	
Idyani	eat it
Tikuthokozani	we thank you
Tiloleni tiyambe	let us eat
kudya	
zakudya izi	this food
Koma zakudyazinso	let this food
Zitsakhale za	be wholesome for
matenda	our use

Then after the maize has been offered, the elders fall on their faces three times and fall on their backs three times and also clap their hands three times. This done we leave the maize in the pots overnight at the shrines. Early in the morning we take all the

children to eat the maize at the shrine. After this has been done we tell people that they can now begin to eat their maize since we have already thanked Chauta for giving it to us. We do this with all the crops here such as mapira (sorghum) and others."³³

This is a very significant ritual indeed. Farhety has indicated that the significance of the first fruits offerings lies in that until the first fruits of the harvest have been presented with homage to the deity the crop is considered sacred and thus a taboo and may not be used for food. The main objective of the first fruit offerings is to desecralise the crops and making them available for profane consumption. It is a recognition of a divine source and ownership of the harvest and the means by which man is reconciled with the vegetation.³⁴

After harvesting, more religious celebrations of thanksgiving take place. Alison Chiwere had indicated that Bimbi always tells them that when harvesting is over they must have masanje (food prepared outside the homesteads for public consumption and without formalities). Thus when there is a good harvest people collect dried maize and bring it to chief Msamala village. They make flour and on an appointed day they cook nsima (thick porridge - traditional food of the people) in big pots and many people from many villages are asked to come and participate in this communal and thanksgiving meal. This turns into a big feast. Some sweet beer is also served. After the eating and drinking is over, women remove all the rest of the firewood which they used for cooking nsima from the fire places (pa moto) and the three stones (mafuwa) on which the pots for cooking nsima rest and throw them away at a malekano (crossroad). My informants told me that they throw away these things at the crossroad (malekano from lekana - to part with or from) in order to part with the old evils of life such as lightning, disease,

jealousies and so on. After this they all go to bathe in Rivi-Rivi River 1/3 mile away from Msamala village. According to Alison Chiwere they bathe themselves in the river in order to have rain later on and to make themselves pure at heart in the clean waters of the Rivi-Rivi River. They come back from the river singing and dancing traditional dances as they like such as chiwoda , or mganda according to tradition. They do this hoping that they will have enough rain in the next rainy season. After this feast has been held in the chief's village, all the other village headmen are asked to make a similar festival of thanksgiving in their villages individually.³⁵ This marks the end of the agricultural season and people wait for the next one.

b Other agricultural rituals - how to drive kapuche away

It is important to point out that it is not only hoped that Bimbi can help people avert or end drought conditions but also that, by ritual prescribed by him, he protects people's crops from vermin. The best known example of this is the kapuche ritual. Kapuche are green worms and very small. They have very small legs and one can hardly see them. Kapuche is very destructive to crops especially maize and cassava. It can eat two acres and half of maize crop per day. Quite often the attack comes when the maize crop is young possibly with only three leaves on it. Kapuche eats all the leaves leaving the stem bare. The maize can sprout again after losing its leaves but with some difficulty. What is worse is that after the first invasion of kapuche has eaten the first leaves, a second invasion of kapuche follows soon and destroys the second leaves on the old stems. Because of this people grow very desperate.

James John Chisanje at one of the interviews I had with him recounted to me that in 1982 there was

an invasion of kapuche in almost the whole of chief Kalembo area. In that year there was a very good rain. People planted their maize and sprouted. When the maize was five inches high from the ground there came an invasion of kapuche. The maize had just produced three leaves when the invasion came. There was great excitement among the people in Kalembo area including people at Mwima seven miles south of Kalembo. A contest developed as to what people should do next.³⁶ According to Kambani White some people decided to go to the District Commissioner at the boma (administration) for help against the invasion. Much maize had been destroyed in whole gardens. Government help came and people applied insecticide to the devastating kapuche. All this was in vain because of the vast area to be covered. People grew even more desperate.

At the end people decided to go to Bimbi for help. In the Mwima area a delegation comprising Chagunda, Chatama and Misowa village headmen was formed. At chief Kalembo, Group village headman Mpango also formed a small delegation. They all went to Bimbi for milawe. When milawe was held, Bimbi told the delegates to return to their villages, pick up leaves of maize, pumpkins and beans (tsamba limodzi limodzi) - one leaf from each garden) from all the gardens. He told them that this should be done by all the villagers. They should take the leaves, sing songs and throw away the leaves in the bush. He assured them that if they did this the kapuche would disappear.³⁷

A ritual of this kind took place in Mpango village after milawe. People contributed a cob of maize from each family and also a single firewood. People collected the maize and took it to Mpango village. They prepared it and cooked it in a big drum by elderly women aged between 60 and 70 years. There were many people more than 500 of them. When the

maize was well cooked they took it from the drum and gave it to people to eat. Men were sitting on one side and the women on the other side according to tradition.

When everyone had eaten the maize some of it remained weighing approximately 5 kg. Then village headman Mpango and the old ladies who cooked the maize selected a young girl with small breasts. The girl was half dressed covering the lower part of her body and her breasts. She was about eleven years of age. Then all the women present took some maize in their hands and moved on to the fields.

This party of women was formed as follows: first, the girl taking some maize in her left hand. Behind her came the two old ladies who cooked the maize for the ceremony. Behind them all came the other women. The girl ran ahead of all of them and they all ran behind her. Once she reached one of the gardens she threw a few maize onto it while at the same time she stooped and picked up a maize stem. As she picked up the maize stem all the women behind her and herself shouted with a great shout AAAA! And with this shout the women too threw some of their maize on to the garden. As they were performing the ritual around the gardens they were singing a song called kapuche. They sung thus:

Leader and her assistant

singing together:	Kapuche eee kapuche
	Kapuche eee kapuche

Chorus:	Wadya mmela (has eaten the crop)
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Altogether:	AAAAA! (as the girl picks up maize).
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This ceremony was repeated in all the gardens in Mpango village in the same way. When they finished going

all round the gardens they took all the maize which the girl had picked up from all gardens to a crossroad (malekano). When they reached the crossroad they threw the maize stems in the bush nearby and at the crossroad itself, stopped singing and went back to their villages. The following morning people went to check their gardens and much to their surprise they found out that all the kapuche had gone! The kapuche did not come back, the maize grew up and produced much fruit. According to John Chisanje this was the second time he witnessed this ceremony being performed in Mpango village. A similar ceremony was performed in 1979 when there was another kapuche invasion.³⁸

c Bimbi vs rain stopping

This analysis would be incomplete without making reference to what is popularly known as rain stopping (kumanga mvula). People, quite often, believe that drought conditions are sometimes caused by some people generally witches (afiti) who stop it from raining by using bad magic - mankhwala yomanga mvula. It seems that by and large people who are accused of stopping the rain are those who display abnormal behaviour. For example an old man or woman living by themselves may be suspected of stopping the rain if they behave suspiciously. A man who may be still making sun-dried bricks for his house in November or December while all other people are busy at work in the gardens may be suspected of stopping the rain in order to ensure the safety of his bricks at the expense of the general public. Again if a man or woman starts clearing his or her garden long after other people have finished preparing their gardens, they may be suspected of stopping the rain from coming in good time. At other times if it only rains at one particular place and there is no rain at other places, people believe that there is a certain person who makes

the rain come at that particular area and stops it from raining at other areas. In order to discover the witch responsible a delegation is formed to go and ask Bimbi to reveal the name of the culprit so that people can force him to untie the rain. Accusations and counter-accusations of rain stopping, therefore abound.

There was no agreement among my informants as to whether any witch (mfiti) can stop the rain. According to Mpango Wadi Msilo only Chewa witches have the power in the region to stop the rain because ne achimisyene ula (they are the owners of the rain). Mpango has it that the wa-Yao realise that being Yao they have no claim to spiritual powers of the land for mu-Yao kuwa mu-Yao Yaope ngakomboleka kutawa ula - (for a Yao being just a Yao cannot stop the rain).³⁴ But Mpango's claim is disputed by other informants.

Mkanda Maganga has argued that the idea that it is only the Chewa people who can stop the rain is not true. Sometimes, Yao, Lomwe and Ngoni people may be accused of stopping the rain. Such people have in the past been named by Bimbi who gives instructions to take the accused and go to such a place to remove his medicine which he used for stopping the rain.⁴⁰

Thus when all other causes of drought conditions have been ruled out the only possibility left is that a witch is stopping the rain. To this effect people go back to Bimbi for another milawe if their offerings for rain fail to obtain the expected results. Bimbi, it is believed, has a spiritual insight which helps him to know at a milawe ceremony who is the responsible witch. The witch then is named and left in the hands of the people to force him release the rain.

The best incident which is vividly remembered by my informants is the Justice affair. According to D.E. Kachingwe, Justice came from Ligwangwa village.

He was a Chewa. During his youth Justice went to Msanje where he married by the system called lobola (kulowola = to pay a certain amount of money for a wife). While there he grew old. The people of the area were fed up with him because of his behaviour. He decided to come back to his home village. He came back with his only daughter. When he arrived in Ligwangwa village he was badly received by his relatives. They knew him very little. To make matters worse he tried to claim Ligwangwa village headmanship. It is believed that he did this because he trusted in his mankhwala (medicine) although he was not the rightful heir to the headmanship. Then he left Ligwangwa village and went to settle six miles away along the Shire River and lived with his only daughter as if she were his wife.

Justice had a garden of maize. What was surprising to other people was that that year there was drought and yet it rained where Justice set up his garden while there was no rain elsewhere. In the midst of his garden there was a tree. Under that tree he buried a pot. In that pot he put some water mixed with special medicine and put a mlamba fish (a species of fish, large about two feet long with large, thick, black head, big mouth, no scales and a beard). This was his makhwala-a-mvula. What was happening was that when the clouds of rain gathered in the sky Justice used to run to his mphika-wa-mankhwala-a-mvula (the medicine pot for stopping rain) and disturb the fish in the water. When the fish was disturbed it too in turn disturbed the water in the pot which created a very strong wind which used to scatter the rain clouds and the sky would be clear of rain. When the clouds were cleared the water in the pot became still. The fish was fed by Justice himself.

People went to consult Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi as to the cause of the drought. That was on 10th January, 1965. When milawe was held Bimbi named Justice as responsible for the disaster.⁴¹ According

to Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi's account, Justice tied the rain deliberately in order to compete with Bimbi and not because of his ambition to succeed to Ligwangwa village headmanship. Bimbi put it in this way:

"I held a milawe and I named him as the person responsible for the drought. He had his garden near the lake where he grew maize, pumpkins and a number of other things. His garden was prosperous. Other people's gardens were not. People were extremely angry with him when they heard that he had tied the rain. Their crops had suffered so much that year. They took hold of him to Ulongwe township and what happened there was awful."⁴²

D.E. Kachigwe has it that Justice was brought to court and two charges were levelled against him. Firstly, he was charged for living with his daughter as if she were his wife and secondly, that he has stopped the rain. He pleaded not guilty to both charges at first but later he conceded that he had stopped the rain because he had not been properly welcomed by his relatives and because they rejected his claim to Ligwangwaship. He was then asked to release the rain. He refused to do so. He demanded that before he could release the rain they would have to guarantee him that he would become Ligwangwa village headman.

People then lost their patience, they tied him with a big chain on his stomach and they hung him on the roof of the court. He never changed his mind. People then took some pepper boiled it with some salt and made him drink it. He still refused to untie the rain. At the end the women told the men who were carrying out the operation. They said "hand him over to us". The men wondered what the women were going to do with him. They took him to private rooms. Then they put his scrotum between two pieces of bamboo and began to squeeze them. The bamboos produced the

required effect. He agreed to untie the rain.

A group of men took him to his farm. He showed them the pot where he kept his medicine. They asked him to break the pot. The fish was cut in small pieces. The people roasted some of these and asked the man to eat them. He did but after a long struggle. When this was done, so the story goes, immediately people saw clouds in the sky. It thundered and the rain poured down heavily. It rained the rest of the day, the whole night and the following day.

After this incident the rain began to come regularly. Justice ran away to Malomo and found refuge in headman Kalolo's village. He stayed there for five years. After this he came back to Ulongwe and pleaded with chief Kalembo to let him settle down at Ulongwe. He was granted permission to stay but died a few years later.⁴³

It is important to point out that these days Bimbi does not mention the names of people whom he thinks that they are stopping the rain, for fear that people may do them harm. Bimbi insists that no one should accuse another of stopping the rain because these quite often are made on false grounds. According to Bimbi it is only him alone who can name who is stopping the rain and who does not. This can only be done at a milawe ceremony. Any other rumours therefore, must be dismissed as unfounded. Bimbi preaches that since the government encourages people to live in peace, he too would like to see the people who come to consult him living in peace with one another because that is God's way. Because of this there has been no naming of someone stopping the rain for a long time now.

CHAPTER 6

THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN THE BIMBI CULT

During my field work all my informants asserted that God as One and Supreme, locally and variously translated as Mulungu, Namalenga, Chauta, Mphambe, Leza and Chisumphi, plays a decisive role in the Bimbi cult. In fact without a belief in a Supreme Being the Bimbi cult would almost be unthinkable. It could not function. This assertion is made because of the many times in which the divine name is mentioned in prayers, rain songs and in the day to day conversations among the people of the Upper Shire Valley and in the Bimbi cult in particular in its various rituals.

The study of the concept of God in the Bimbi cult and in the Chewa religious system generally is faced with many problems. There are a number of reasons for this. To start with the lack of written sources such as sacred scriptures, written systematic theologies, liturgy, creed, prayers and songs of praise, by the African people themselves which could give us a clear idea of the Chewa's belief in God inhibits us from any fruitful attempt to embark on a precise and serious study of the Chewa deity of which the Bimbi cult is one of its religious institutions. With the help of written sources, for instance, we could be enabled to successfully examine the development of Chewa religious thought in connection with their idea of God.

Such systematic expositions of the nature of God and his work is non-existent in Chewa religious institutions in a written form let alone in the Bimbi cult. The Bimbi cult, unlike Christianity and Islam, does not claim a special revelation of God with a special salvation history. Instead whatever we know about it is shrouded in myths, prayers, songs, and

oral traditions which are difficult to examine historically.

To make matters worse Bimbi cult adherents and even Bimbi himself seem to be less preoccupied with the need to express their belief in God in terms of intellectual philosophical ideas. The religion of the Chewa and of the Bimbi cult in particular is more acted in symbolic actions and rituals. It is more lived than argued out in coherent theological expositions. Chewa religion is more a matter of faith than intellectual reflection upon one's belief. In this way it is difficult to determine what constitutes orthodoxy and what does not.

Besides, the missionary factor both in its influential aspect as well as in its teaching and writings has left little of what we could assume to be purely traditional. Some of the myths, for instance, we find in the Bimbi cult are heavily influenced either by Islam or Christianity so much that one comes up constantly with a rather distorted presentation of the issues at stake.

Moreover, the attitude of the first missionary writers has made the situation even more difficult for as Hugh Stannus once remarked:

"The matter of the religious beliefs professed by natives of East Central Africa is one beset with many difficulties to the student of today. It has been subject of many essays by workers in the missionary field, but the wide contact of the natives of Nyasaland with missionary effort during the past thirty years has done much to confuse the problem, and one feels that many missionaries in their writings rather colour the picture with their own feelings."¹

Clyde Mitchell has indicated that early missionaries looked upon many of the traditional pagan beliefs and customs as repugnant to christian teaching and

did much to discourage them.² This dealt a death blow to the only possible sources which could have formed the basis of our understanding of God among the Chewa in the absence of written materials.

It should be obvious by now that much of what we know about the concept of God among the Chewa is bound to be far from the naked truth because of the various forces which have been at work among this agricultural society for the past one century or more. The Chewa claim today that the concept of God among them is as old as the people themselves going back to the time they became aware that they were mere creatures in the complexity of all created things. This awareness made them inwardly dependent on a creator God who was beyond and yet within their immediate surroundings, a being whom they had to honour, worship and depend upon for their very existence. This is vividly expressed in their symbolic ritual actions in their day to day life situations in accordance with their basic needs, their ecological circumstances and their aspirations in this life and the life beyond. It should be noted that many of the conclusions I have drawn in the subsequent discussions about the nature, work and God's relationship to man and to the world, are based on the claims made by Bimbi, his cult officials and Chewa people in general today which means that they are not free from christian and islamic influences since many of my informants were either christians or muslims.

In order to have a comprehensive picture of the Chewa concept of God and of the Bimbi cult in particular we need to examine the literature so far available. C.H. Stigand writing sometime in 1907 gives us a rather negative picture. He writes:

"God (Chauta or Mulungu) nothing much is known about him. He is regarded as more or less omnipotent and omniscient but seems to be a hazy idea of some supreme being and to

account for unexplained phenomena such as thunder, lightning and small-pox. He does not seem to require prayer and is ever hardly mentioned."³

This view, however, is contradicted by a number of other earlier views of Chewa deity. To start with David and Charles Livingstone who visited the Malawi region in the second half of the 19th century noted that the Mang'anja⁴ believed in the existence of a Supreme Being called Mpambe and also Morungo and in a future state.⁵ They further observed that the African faith seemed to be based on the belief that there is one Almighty Maker of heaven and earth and that he has given the various plants of earth to man to be employed as mediators between him and the spirit world where all who have been born and die continue to live.⁶

Chauncy Maples who worked among the Chewa in Malawi has indicated that there were no polytheistic tendencies in their concept of God and that their belief was in one God the Supreme Creator of the visible world. According to Maples this monotheistic belief was there long before the arrival of Islam and Christianity. He sums up the situation in these words:

"Perhaps the almost total absence of polytheistic notions has mainly to do with the non-idolatrous character of their religious instinct. So far as the people realise their own personality and know themselves as beings who will and who are self-determining so far are they led also to think of God as truly a personal God ...

To God then conceived as a personal being and as spirit do they refer their own lives as well as those of all creaturely existence."⁷

John Buchanan in his book The Shire Highlands has also observed that among the people of the Upper Shire

Valley there was a belief in a Supreme Being whom they acknowledged and whose wrath they endeavoured to avert in a number of ways. Mulungu was to them the Being who made heaven and earth and who presided over their destinies and his good actions or evil actions towards them were just as he was pleased or displeased.⁸

It is interesting to note that the concept of God as one and Supreme over other spiritual beings can be traced back to the 17th century. Henry Rowley, for instance, has documented that Father Santos in his History of Eastern Ethiopia, which was first published in Paris in 1684, remarked that the people of the Malawi region had a clear idea of God.⁹ Joao dos Santos himself in the book cited above seems to indicate that the people of the area in question basically knew that there was one God who rewards in this and the other world the good and the evil done by the people and that they called this Supreme Being Molungo.¹⁰

In a number of regional cults in Malawi there seems to be a general belief in a Supreme Being. W.H.J. Rangeley, for example, has pointed out that the Chewa religious institution under Makewana which flourished for some time in Central Malawi was in fact based on the belief that God-Mphambe or Chauta had entered into Makewana and made her make strange prophecies.¹¹ Schoffeleers has it that from eighteenth and nineteenth century documents as well as from recent local research, the cult under Makewana was in fact, in its traditional form, known as that of Chisumphi which is one of the Chewa names for God. In the religious complex that evolved, Makewana was only one of the titles of Chisumphi's wife, a ritual personage dedicated to his service and who functioned as a mediator between God and the Chewa nation.¹²

H.L. Vail in his study of the religion of the Tumbuka people in Malawi has reiterated that the Tumbuka shared with the Chewa and the Tonga a belief

in a High God generally known as Chiuta, but also known as Leza. According to Vail from the cosmological point of view the Tumbuka believed that the world was under Chiuta but also believed that an intermediary spirit was required when praying to the High God. That intermediary spirit was Chikang'ombe.¹³

This general belief in a Supreme God is also shared by the followers of the Bimbi cult. The cult officials and the people who adhere to it claim unanimously that the Bimbi cult is founded on the belief in God as one and Supreme. As we have already seen elsewhere¹⁴ the Bimbi himself, for instance, believes that his call came from Mulungu or Chauta who acted and still acts in him through the intermediacy of his ancestral spirits. We get a glimpse of the Bimbi's concept of God and God's role in the Bimbi cult from his pronouncements at milawe ceremonies and from prayers which people say when making offerings for rain at the rain shrines.

Bimbi believes that God revealed himself to his ancestors as Mulungu or Chauta. To this Mulungu or Chauta they addressed themselves as our father up in heaven. To him they prayed in times of drought asking him to give them rain. To the same God they also prayed that Chauta may drive away epidemics such as small-pox influenza and others and when their land was invaded by man-eating lions and God answered their prayers as does a father to his children. According to Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi this awareness of Chauta did not come upon his ancestors through a special revelation but upon mutual respect of man with his fellow man. Since Chauta is Spirit He is invisible to man but man can see Chauta in his fellow man in one's neighbour. No one can claim to know Chauta for Chauta is unknowable and no image can give man a glimpse of what Chauta is. Man reveals to his fellow man what God is like and man's social, religious, political and economic relationship is a determining

factor of God-man relationship and a major factor in the success or failure of man. Social relationships constantly impinge on God-man relationships and consequently on the political economy.¹⁵

But more importantly, Bimbi sees God more through the manifestation of his goodness in nature in the provision of rain, the life-giving water. This of all the revelatory experiences of man in the Bimbi cult, is perhaps the most dominant epithet of all. God is the rain giver and one of the names of God in the Bimbi cult is Mphambe - lightning. As we will find in the course of this discussion it seems plausible to argue that a great number of names for God as used in the Bimbi cult reflect directly or indirectly this idea of God the Rain-giver.

We have seen in the previous chapters that agricultural prosperity is the main concern of the Chewa who inhabit the Upper Shire Valley since this forms the backbone of their economy. Recurrent drought conditions however, have at one time or another threatened the very survival of the Chewa as a nation. It seems that as a response to this threat the Bimbi cult evolved a religious schema in which God was viewed more in terms of their ecological concerns. God was more understood in so far as he was identified with the land - its fertility and productivity - and an even supply of rain which made life viable.

W.M.J. Van Binsbergen has indicated that the process of ecological transformation of nature forms a major element in the religious system of any society with a subsistence economy.¹⁶ According to Binsbergen religious institutions which are centred on shrines and religious activities taking place at such centres are directed to invisible entities who are supposed to be capable of exercising influence on the visible world in one way or another. Such invisible entities are associated with ecological processes,

respectively with natural conditions for such processes.¹⁷ This theory seems to apply quite satisfactorily in the way in which the Bimbi cult functions and perceives God. God is perceived as in ultimate control of the processes of nature especially in regulating the agricultural seasons between the dry and the rainy seasons.

Having established this point we need to examine also a number of other aspects in connection with the teaching of the Bimbi concerning God. According to Bimbi, life in this world must be God-centred and not man-centred. When the reverse occurs then man finds himself into trouble. Bimbi has it that Chauta, as the Supreme Spiritual being requires worship. When people make their offerings they must kupembeza Mulungu (worship God) with all their hearts and not only with their lips. Chauta hates lip service. Those who pray to him must show faith in him in action, by making offerings in kind.

Bimbi insists that man must worship God here and now in this physical world. For it is in this physical plane of things that God is most active and most concerned as the creator of man and of other created things. Mulungu is not up in heaven but here on earth among his people his presence being manifested in the day to day ordinary concerns of human life in the world of nature. Bimbi theology seems to be primarily this world-oriented possibly because of its emphasis in meeting the needs for an even supply for rain which appears to offer a continuity of life in this world. A number of people who follow Bimbi traditions view it as a religious institution which is concerned with the basic needs of human life here and now, while Christianity and Islam are primarily concerned with their spiritual life after their life here on earth.

Bimbi teaching asserts that life hereafter depends primarily on interpersonal relationships. The

future bliss depends on how man handles the present as evidenced in the Chewa proverb 'konza ka pansi kuti ka mmwamba katsike' (care for today's world for the future depends upon it).¹⁸

Anubi Chipande Chekwenda, one of the Bimbi cult leaders, has indicated that those who participate in Bimbi rituals believe that God is an absolute moral Supreme Being. He is holy and because of his holiness he detests uchimo (sin) and when people make their offerings to God they must confess their uchimo in order to ask God to forgive their sins.¹⁹

Another belief prevalent in the Bimbi cult is that God is a God of peace. He created man and the world of nature so that they should live in peace and harmony. Chauta is a God of order and not of chaos and social disorders are seen not only as anti-social but also as anti-Chauta who created the world that man may have joy. As father of humanity and of the lower orders of creation Bimbi followers believe that as children of God they are set apart to enjoy God's freedom - freedom from anxieties on how to secure man's basic needs: food, water, health and the gift of procreation. From this point of view salvation is viewed mainly in terms of freedom from human suffering imposed upon man by the evils inherent in nature such as disease, hunger, drought, pests, lightning and also from man's evil intentions against his fellow man.

God is also believed to hear the prayers of his people and to succour them in times of need. Therefore, man can approach him in prayer. God is pleased with the prayers and offerings of his people. A prayerful community is considered as a godly community and at one with Chauta. This belief is fundamental and deep rooted in the Bimbi cult.

Having discussed some aspects of the concept of God in the Bimbi cult it is essential that we examine the names which Bimbi himself and the people

who participate in the Bimbi cult and the Chewa people in general use for God. In the absence of a well developed Bimbi theology of the Supreme Being such names are the most important sources for our understanding of God's nature, attributes and functions within this Chewa religious system. To start with there is the name:

Mulungu

According to Geoffrey Parrinder, this Chewa name for the Supreme Being is found in a number of other languages of East Africa in various forms such as Murungu, Mungu, Mlungu, and Mluku.²⁰

It is important to note that when the first missionaries arrived in the Malawi region they used the word Mulungu in all translations of scripture though it seemed to them that this word was used by the local people as a general name for spirit. According to Duff Macdonald the spirit of a deceased man was called his mulungu and all the prayers and offerings of the living were presented to such spirits of the dead. Furthermore, it seemed to him from the very words of the people themselves that the spirits of the dead were the gods of the living and that where the word Mulungu was used as a proper name it appeared to be either "the great spirit" (mzimu) of all men, a spirit formed by adding all the departed spirits together or as the "great ancestor."²¹

Another uncertainty for using the word Mulungu for God was expressed by W.P. Johnson. He writes about the Chewa:

"Ancestor-worship is the cult found everywhere and when we try to express the idea of God there is difficulty in discovering a name that can be understood. There are undoubtedly grave dangers in using the native word Mulungu which seems to connote God on one side."²²

But Chauncy Maples seems to be at home with the word Mulungu as applied to God. He has indicated that the word Mulungu is probably the best to which to attach the idea of God. According to Maples the name Mulungu must have derived from the adjective stem kulu, meaning 'great'. He further indicates that as found amongst the Zulus in its full reduplicated form (Unkulunkulu) it would seem to mean a "great-great grandfather" - a first ancestor, perhaps of a family or tribe. Maples adds that metaphorically the word then got transferred to the Being who originated all things. It is further maintained that by a process of mutilation the reduplicated form nkulunkulu or possibly akulu-akulu meaning "great-great" or "very great" got worn away into Mulungu though the reduplication is, in fact, still there to intensify the meaning of the word.²³

A more acceptable and more representative theological interpretation of the word Mulungu as used and understood by the Chewa is that given by David Scott. In his Cyclopaedic Dictionary of the Mang'anja Language he defines the word Mulungu as

"God ... not different forces of nature, not spirits, nor fetishes, but God, the Creator, Spirit, Almighty, Personal God."²⁴

Scott observed that among the Mang'anja God (Mulungu) is never in plural because God is one. There are no idols (zithunzithunzi) called gods and spirits (azimu) are spirits of people who died. Worship is wholly associated with the idea of God. Scott further noted that God is conceived as one, a distinct Person who cannot be identified with the powers of nature nor confounded with the spirits in general who, as spirits, are supposed to be with him in the spirit world. God is above of spirits and it is Him who created people sending them from above and making them here below.²⁵

It is interesting to note that Scott's observation seems to be in accord with the claim made by the Chewa today. They consider Mulungu as a proper name conveying the notion of a truly Personal, Supreme and Unique being. Whether this claim is a result of christian and islamic influences upon them it is difficult to tell in the present circumstances. It is important to point out that sometimes the word Mulungu is said to have been formed from the verb stem lunga which, according to Carl Meinhof means 'be or put straight',²⁶ prefixed by Mu which, according to Edwin Smith denotes a personal being in a great number of African languages.²⁷ This being the case, the word Mulungu seems to imply an awareness of a Personal Supreme being who brings order in the world out of chaos.²⁸

Another interpretation which has been suggested for the word Mulungu is that it is formed out of the word lungu²⁹ which means clan or family prefixed by Mu meaning a 'person' as different from a 'thing'. Mulungu, does, therefore, by implication mean that God as perceived by the Chewa is a Personal being who has an interest in the survival and continuity of the family, lineage, tribe and human race in general and in the role and place of the dead.

Chiuta or Chauta

Another word used by the Bimbi and the Chewa people in general for God is Chiuta or Chauta. W.P. Johnson once remarked:

"... the Nyasas and other tribes sometimes give you quite a different name for God - Chiuta - a name that seems connected with phenomena of nature and is especially used when there has been any great natural occurrence, for instance, when a tornado has swept some village. There is, however, no antagonism between

these two names. The natives would use them impartially, and taken together they seem to bring out the idea of God well."³⁰

The name Chiuta or Chauta comes from the stem word uta (bow) prefixed by chi (big) to denote size and greatness. Chiuta in Chichewa means 'big bow'. The name Chiuta for God may have come about by associating the powers of God with those of the bow (uta) which the Chewa used in hunting and for war. The rainbow which stretches on the sky by its sheer size and the mystery of its beginning and end conveys a sense of power and awe. The rain-bow is known among the Chewa as uta-wa-Leza, that is, the bow of Leza, Leza being another name for God. It is a manifestation of his power for Chauta is Almighty.

Scott has speculated that God is called Chiuta because he stretches the rainbow across the sky. Chiuta is God in space and the rainbow sign across.³¹ Cullen Young on the other hand has pointed out that Chauta implies a Great One of whom the bow is a sign and its appearance on the sky implies somewhere a thoughtful concern for human need.³²

It seems that the name Chauta is intended to indicate God's transcendental presence, infinity and greatness. God is also perceived as mysterious, incomprehensible, high and lifted up as the rainbow in the sky.

Namalenga

Another name widely used by the Chewa people and by Bimbi for God is Namalenga. It is formed from the stem verby lenga which means 'to create', 'to do wonders' or 'to do things beyond the power of man',³³ prefixed by the word nama which means 'holding' or 'gripping',³⁴ which conveys the idea of God the Creator of the universe - the heavens (mlenga-lenga) - and

the earth - (dziko la pansi). God (Namalenga) upholds the world sustaining it with his power by the wonders of his deeds, for Namalenga is Wonderful. His creative work is not just a once and for all event but he keeps constantly renewing his creation as evidenced in the seasons of the year alternating between the dry season and the rainy season, the rainy season being the time when new life comes into being. Looked at from this point of view, to the Chewa, Namelenga is a Power which is constantly at work making things anew and in firm control of the created world. No other power natural or supernatural is credited with such absolute control of the universe and of the affairs of men.

This belief is so fundamental and deep rooted in Chewa theology that Chauncy Maples once remarked that there was no peculiar difficulties in the missionaries' way while attempting to determine the Africans' views about God for

"the visible world, the things of sense around them, these people refer to God and God alone, and they say always unhesitatingly, God made them. Further, they think of God as the Personal Giver and Sustainer of life, whether of animal or lower forms. Thus from him, they say, comes the rain that causes the corn to sprout and the trees to bud. They recognise as from him the food that nourishes all animals, with man at their head. Physical life and health, then, they believe to be the gift of God alone. Man in his whole complex being, body and soul, is God's creation."³⁵

The Nyasaland Diocesan Chronicle also reports that the Chewa had, in their folklore, apparently, a story similar to that of the Garden of Eden, for they said that in the beginning there was a garden wherein was a man and his sister. When Bishop Maples first preached at Likoma and narrated the story of Adam and

Eve the people were amazed and said: "that is just what we were taught in the initiation dance (nkhole)".³⁶

It is important to bear in mind that there is no doctrine of creation ex-nihilo in Chewa theology as found in the teaching of the Christian church, but the Chewa in general and the Bimbi cult in particular have cosmogonies worthy of note. The Chewa creation myth has it that:

"In the beginning there was Chiuta (God) and the earth. Chiuta lived above the sky and below him was the earth, waterless and without life. One day, dark clouds began to cover the sky, lightning flared and peals of thunder were heard.

Then the sky opened, Chiuta (God), the first human pair and all the animals descended in a shower of rain. They alighted on a topped hill by the name of Kaphirintiwa, in the mountains of Dzalanyama. After their descent the soft surface hardened and turned into a rock. On this rock the imprints of their feet as well as the spoor of many animals can still be seen. There can be seen two pairs of human feet the man's larger than the woman's. There are also imprints of a hoe, a winnowing basket and a mortar. Plants and trees grew up yielding abundant food. God, men and animals lived together in happiness and peace."³⁷

This story of creation is common place among the Chewa of the Upper Shire Valley who look at Kaphirintiwa as the cradle of their civilisation. The Bimbi too has his own cosmogony but it appears to be heavily influenced by the Biblical story of creation. According to Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi:

"In the beginning there was Namalenga (God). The earth was void. There was no life, no man, no animals but God. Then God created water and the earth became an orderless mass of mud. Then after many years there came out of the mud an egg and out of the

egg there came a pair of human beings - a man and a woman. They were the tribe of Adam. There were only white people.

Men and women married and the number of people grew on earth that there was not enough farming land between them and then they began to kill one another. Men turned into cannibals for there was no land for them to grow food. Uchimo (sin) multiplied in the world for men lived and behaved like animals. Then God said to himself: 'I will destroy man because I cannot bear seeing them eating one another because of lack of land to grow their food'. So God sent a flood, that was Noah's flood. God did not destroy all the people or all the animals but left Noah and pairs of every animal as seed (mbeu).

When the flood came down Noah's ark landed on mount Ararat. There is where the black people were created as a new creation. They were living on the mountain and called themselves aPhiri that is 'people of the mountain.'³⁸

This story, though it has so many christian elements in it, seems to have great symbolic religious significance in the Bimbi cult. The emphasis on the creative activities of God is intended to explain that man is dependent on God his Creator from whom comes Life. Life is depicted as coming from water the first substance of God's creation. Out of the water came not only man but also other created things both animals and plants for man's use in order to sustain his life in this world. Lack of food drives man into the state of brutality and cannibalism. Humanity is lost because of deprivation until God creates the world anew.

E. Ikenga-Metuh has indicated that African cosmogonies should be taken seriously because they provide the symbolic categories by which Africans understand the organisation of their universe and also suggest patterns by which they try to maintain the balance and the harmony of the world through ritual. According to Ikenga-Metuh cosmogonies in the African

context define the nature and power of being in the universe and their relationships and thus suggest rituals by which man tries to relate with them and the universe as a whole.³⁹

The absence of the doctrine of creation ex-nihilo seems to be common in African cosmogonies as it is the case in the Chewa and Bimbi mythologies. However, though the familiar Euro-Christian concept of creation from nothing or bringing things into being from non-existing substance is not obvious in the African cosmogonies one fundamental aspect in these creation myths seem to be abundantly clear: African Supreme Gods are very often referred to as creators.⁴⁰

It seems plausible to argue that Chiuta or Chauta among the Chewa qualifies to be called Supreme . . . Being in a sense that there is no other spiritual being who in the life and thought of the Chewa is conceived as greater than Chauta - the Almighty and ruler of the universe.

Mphambe

The name Mphambe is also used for God among the Chewa and in the Bimbi cult in particular. Mphambe in Chichewa means, collectively, thunder and lightning and it is associated first and foremost with rain and at a higher degree of abstraction with God. Mphambe (God) is the Rain Giver, the source of all life. According to Scott the name Mphambe, which is also used for rain and thunder, thus links them with God not because these are in any way personified, but because they display characteristics by which God is known.⁴¹ Scott has indicated that the first rains among the Chewa, in fact, are also known as 'Mphambe coming near his people',⁴² ready to make the seeds and plants to germinate.

Scott has also speculated that the word Mphambe must have derived from the verb pambana meaning 'to excel' implying that God is Almighty and whose

active power the thunder and the rain are signs.⁴³ Because of his power to do all things God is perceived as king (Mfumu) hence he rules over the wills of his people by his great will.

It may be of interest to note that quite often the Chewa refer to thunder as mau a Mulungu (God's voice) which can be heard everywhere at once. Lightning especially when it strikes a person or animals is thought to be a manifestation of God's displeasure because of the sins of men. It is thus the manifestation of his anger. It may also be added that Mphambe (God) is conceived as Light as he stretches forth in the sky in the form of lightning.

Leza, lezi, Mlezi

These three names for God are of the same family and all carry the same meaning. Geoffrey Parrinder has pointed out that the name Leza and its variants is used by a number of other African peoples from the northern Kalahari into Zaire and across into Zambia and Tanzania. Leza is said to have derived from several roots of which the favourite is a verb meaning 'to cherish'.⁴⁴

In the context of the Chewa people the name Leza is assumed to have come from the stem verb lera which has several shades of meaning such as 'to nurse', 'nourish', 'to be lenient', 'to be gentle', 'to be kindly' and 'to bring up as a mother does for her child'.⁴⁵ Taken together these shades of meaning seem to convey the idea of the providence of God. God is Leza because he literally feeds his people by providing them with food at proper seasons.

When there is famine people think that God - The-Mother is angry and is withholding his food as punishment for sins committed by the people. Leza is perceived as excessively kind, gentle, caring, forgiving and all loving for a mother cannot be

without love.

To the Chewa God is as real as the earthly Mother. God (Leza) is the Mother of mankind and they see themselves in a mother-son relationship with Leza. This concept among the Chewa seems to carry more meaning than the father-son relationship implied in the idea of God as Creator. This is based in the close relationship which exists between the mother and the child on the principle of matrilineage in which the ancestress is thought to be the founder of the family, lineage, clan or tribe.

b Other aspects of God

As to other aspects of God in addition to those discussed above is the idea that God continues and has delegated his powers of creation to the human race especially so to the makolo (parents) who are as it were God's representatives here on earth. A wrong committed against one's parents, especially one's mother, is believed ultimately to be sin committed against God. When a mother utters a curse against a child it is as if God himself through the mother has uttered a curse, a manifestation of his anger the consequences of which can be either bad luck, sickness or even premature death. The makolo (parents) are assisted and overseen, by the ancestral spirits in their powers of procreation since the living-dead are as much interested in the continuity of the corporate group as the living are.

God is addressed in anthropomorphical terms. He sees, hears, and knows everything because he has big eyes and big ears. He can also eat, though symbolically through the mizimu, (ancestral spirits) the offerings made to him by his people here on earth. Unlike the mizimu God is not limited by time or space. He is everywhere and does not belong to a particular family, lineage or tribe. The Chewa

recognise the universality of God as against the ecological limitations of their ancestral spirits.

God is also perceived as changeless, that is, he never grows old as men do and never dies. He is eternal. God is ever living and ever watching upon his people.

As to God's abode, it is taken for granted that Leza lives up in heaven which is conceived more in terms of the sky - mlenga-lenga. God's kingdom is known as ku-Mlungu and is believed to be inhabited by the ancestral spirits who, by their virtue of living with Mlungu are known as aku-Mlungu (those in God's world). Since God lives in the spirit world he transcends the physical world but he is also immanent in the person of the ancestral spirits and when he comes down in the blessings of the rain. There are riddles among the Chewa which try to express the transcendence of God. Here is one: "I have two small baskets, one I use to play with the other I dare not" (ndiri ndi nsengwa ziwiri imodzi ndimaseweretsa koma ina ai). The answer is "the sky and the earth". One can play with the earth moulding toys and other things on it because it is man's habitation while the sky is high up, unapproachable since it is God's abode.

This emphasis on the transcendence of God which is intended to focus on the otherness of God led some students of Chewa religion to conclude that God among the Chewa was too remote to be of any relevance unlike the spirits with whom the people were in constant communion.⁴⁶ "The most obvious characteristic of the Chewa God", Stuart writes "was his distance from and indifference towards the affairs of men. He had set the world in motion and then left it to men and the spirits to accomodate themselves to it."⁴⁷

It should be obvious by now that judging from the names the Chewa use for God, the Chewa Supreme Being is not as absent as we have been made to believe.

Recent research seems to indicate that though God is conceived as "wholly other" and not within the ordinary reach of man, He is nevertheless viewed as concerned with the welfare of the people in their daily needs, especially in connection with their daily food and health. As Alexander Hetherwick has indicated

"It is God", is the statement constantly on the native lips in the presence of fortune, good or bad. He-I use the personal pronoun - is an intense reality to them. He is with them all through life, and to him they go at death."⁴⁸

It may also be of interest to point out that the Chewa and those who participate in the Bimbi cult perceive God in ethical terms. Livingstone accorded the Mang'anja with a high degree of morality which seems to indicate that they were conscious of a far more superior moral power to which they were ultimately responsible. "Their idea of moral evil" Livingstone documents, "differs in no respect from ours. Evil speaking, lying, hatred, disobedience to parents and neglect of them are said by the intelligent to have been all known to be sin as well as theft, murder, adultery, before they knew naught of the Europeans or their teaching."⁴⁹

It is this fundamental ethical nature of God which enables the Bimbi to act as a censor of public morality when people commit offences against God and against their neighbours. The Bimbi believes that his call and his work is directed and determined by God to whom he is but a servant.

The nature and role of territorial spirits

It has been argued above that the Bimbi cult is founded in the belief in God whom, as we have already

seen, is variously called Mulungu, Chauta and a number of other names for the Supreme Being. An examination of the names for God at hand, the elaborate rituals carried out at the rain shrines and the prayers said and songs sung at such rituals seem to substantiate this claim.

It has been pointed out that the ecological circumstances in the Upper Shire Valley and perhaps among the Chewa people generally have provided them a cosmological pattern in which their concept of God, their symbols, beliefs, myths and rituals are expressive of a people with great agricultural concerns. In this section we move to examine the nature and role of Chewa territorial spirits which are so prominent in the life and thought of the Chewa and in the Bimbi cult in particular for God is believed to interact with his people through them in matters connected with rain.

Matthew Schoffeleers has indicated that the Mang'anja make a clear distinction between what is termed spirits of the land and spirits of the household, the former being invoked for the well being of the country and population as a whole, the latter by individuals and lineage sections. Thus for instance territorial spirits are invoked at times of droughts, epidemics, wars and similar calamities.⁵⁰

In the history of Southern Malawi Schoffeleers identifies the territorial spirits with the spirits of the Chewa of the Phiri clan in the persons of deceased chiefs and some of their more notable kinsmen. These royal spirits came to be regarded as territorial because they were the first to arrive in the area and turned it into arable land. Hence they were responsible for matters pertaining to the land and to the population.⁵¹ In the Upper Shire Valley the category of territorial spirits is occupied by the ancestral spirits⁵² of the Chewa of the Phiri clan now represented by the holders of the Bimbi title.

This special position is claimed on the assumption that they are the first settlers in the valley thus giving them the ritual control of the ecological forces specially pertaining to rain.

These spirits determine who should be Bimbi, they possess the incumbent to perform the chilewe and milawe ceremonies and they are invoked when people make their offerings for rain at Bimbi mother shrine or at its subsidiary shrines. It appears plausible to argue that the importance and significance of Chewa territorial spirits in Bimbi religious system is based on the fundamental belief in the immortality of the soul and of the resilience of the human personality even after death. "The Marave", wrote Gamitto, "believe in the immortality of the soul."⁵³ This statement, as applied to the Chewa people, seems to be true in all aspects for the Chewa believe that when a person dies he becomes a spiritual being - mzimu, and acquires characteristics of immortality and eternity. The idea that the dead live again after death among the Chewa is both pre-Islamic and pre-Christian. David Livingstone in the second half of the 19th century was quick to observe that this faith was deep rooted among the Chewa and that it formed the hall mark of their religion. At one of his interviews with Chinsuse, one of the Chewa chiefs, Livingstone reports him saying:

"We live only a few days here but we live again after death. We do not know where, or in what conditions, for the dead never return to tell us. Sometimes the dead do come back and appear in dreams but they never speak to us where they have gone, nor how they fare."⁵⁴

The nature and role of territorial spirits can be best understood within the general concept of "ancestral spirits" as held by the Chewa. John Mbiti

has distinguished two broad categories of spirits namely those which were created by God as such and those which were once human beings.⁵⁵ The Chewa ancestral spirits belong to this latter category. According to Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi every person in the world has a spirit created by Mulungu. Ancestral spirits are spirits of notable men and women who once lived here on earth and died and are now living with Mulungu. Bimbi has it that there are no ancestral spirits which were not at one time or another existing in a living bodily personality though some of them cannot, presently, be traced back in terms of their lineages because human minds are forgetful. All the other disembodied spirits of men and women belong to the general term - spirits of the dead - mizimu or azimu.⁵⁶

John Swizan Balamanja, another Bimbi official figure, has indicated that the spirits of young royals who die while they are still children, are also considered as ancestral spirits in the Bimbi cult because of their structural position in society as members of the royal family and entitled to be invoked in times of prayer for rain or any other calamity.⁵⁷

It must be borne in mind that the term 'ancestral' spirit is a relative one and not an absolute term in that there is no fixed group of people whose spirits turn into ancestral spirits when they die. Ancestry is relative to the individual or groups of people standing in a consanguinal or affinal relationship with the departed within the principle of matrilineage, in other words, it is based on kinship. An ancestral spirit to one may be peripheral to another even within the same lineage. It also depends on the structural position of the departed and value imparted to them in relation to their immediate kinsmen. It is important to point out that it is doubtful whether those who die in infancy before

coming out of the traditional maternity ward chikuta - ever become spirits at all. They cannot become spirits since they are 'things' (chinthu, sing zinthu pl.) and not 'human beings' (munthu, sing. anthu, pl.). Most certainly the spirits of witches (mizimu ya afiti) are supposed never to acquire the status of ancestral spirits since being an ancestral spirit is, in itself, a sign of moral superiority and witches are thought to be evil persons by nature hence they are evil spirits (mizimu yoipa).

When witches die, they are said to wander around homeless and quite often they are believed to turn into lions, leopards, hyenas, foxes and the like. It is common belief that when they turn to the physical world in these forms it is in order to avenge themselves against the people who did them wrong while they were here on earth. Their spirits are believed to turn into dangerous and vicious animals when they are dying or after their burial. In order to ensure that this does not happen, the services of a special ng'anga (medicine man) are enlisted in order to neutralise their dreaded spirit.

As regards the spirits of good people it is common belief that these live in the spirit world in which Chauta or Mulungu is king. The spirit world is quite often associated with the underground (pansi) because the dead are buried in the ground but it is not identical with it, for the departed, though immanent in the grave, transcend the grave in their spiritual state and can move about without let or hindrance. The spirits of good people are sometimes said to return to the physical world in the form of harmless snakes (njoka) the most celebrated of these being nsato - python. In such situations no harm is caused to such snakes but they are looked upon as mzimu or azimu of the departed. For instance, Hodgson has indicated that among the Achewa living in Dowa district, four snakes are said to be spirits

because they do not bite and are rarely seen. They are chilelo, thunga, nsatu and mdala. If a man were to meet any one of these on his way to hunt would return forthwith and offer a sacrifice before setting out afresh on his enterprise. If one of these snakes were to enter a house, the inmates would cast lots to discover whose spirit it is and then offer sacrifice accordingly. The snakes would usually not be killed.⁵⁸

It seems plausible to argue that this association between ancestral spirits or spirits in general with snakes is highly symbolic. As a matter of fact snakes appear to have a universal symbolism in a number of religious systems. Geoffrey Parrinder, for one, has indicated that the snake has had a fascination for men in every land. It is mysterious, fearful and immortal. According to Parrinder because the snake goes on its belly without feet, living apart from and dangerous to all living things, it is feared. Because it sheds its skin yet continues to live, it is regarded as immortal. He further points out that a snake with its tail in its mouth, apparently swallowing itself yet with no beginning or end like a circle and sphere is symbolic of eternity.⁵⁹ This concept of eternity seems to be the basis of Chewa spirituality. The spirits of the dead survice physical death, death being the transitional point of existence from the purely physical to the purely spiritual. The snake-spirit can be viewed as a symbol of victory over death.

Territorial ancestral spirits in the form of snakes play an extraordinary role in the Bimbi cult. As we have already seen in the previous discussions, snakes in Bimbi religion are a dominant symbol. It is the male symbol and it stands for the husband wedded to a spirit wife and through whose powers of procreation is believed to bring fertility of the land. In a sense while the snake spirit - the husband - symbolizes the deity itself, the spirit-wife as we have already seen elsewhere symbolises the mother earth

whose ritual sexual union guarantees the continuity of life on earth for both animals and plants.

It is important to point out that the Chewa unanimously assert that the ancestral spirits are not gods. They are mere creatures. What distinguishes them from the living is that at death the departed acquire god-like characteristics. Ancestral spirits have a beginning in that they were once created by God but after death they never experience death again in their spiritual state of life.

The spirits of the dead are believed to know everything even those things which are done in secret by individuals and that they are thus a silent testimony to the divinity of men. Another characteristic of the spirits of the departed is that they hear and see everything. Nothing can escape them of the secrets of man.

One of the fundamental distinctions between God and the ancestral spirits lies in the fact that while God has unlimited powers in space and time the ancestral spirits' power is limited within their family, lineage, clan, tribe or territory depending on their structural position in the community in which they lived before death. In a sense the person's structural position in the social sphere is the determining factor of his position in the spiritual sphere.

With this in mind the Chewa view with great suspicion, scepticism and unbelief the introduction of other spirits in Chewa cosmology by christian missionaries. It seems to them as contradictory to the laws of nature. Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi puts it this way in his sermons:

"The white missionaries say that we should discard our ancestral spirits and that we should not call upon them when we pray. They say we should call upon the name of St. Paul, St. Peter, St. John asking them to help us in this land of the black people. Why should

one call upon the spirits of total strangers, people of other nations saying: 'please, help us we are in trouble, we the black people?'

Do you think a stranger will listen to you? Are the spirits of white missionaries your fathers or grandfathers? Are they your kinsmen? How can the spirits of white saints hear the pleas of black people? Can the needs and wishes of the two be the same? The white people in their own countries pray to Mulungu by calling upon the names of their ancestral spirits. If in their prayers they were to mention the names of the black people's ancestral spirits, their minds could not be same. Their requests could not be answered."⁶⁰

Another view expressing scepticism on the mediatory role of christian saints which seem as 'foreign ancestral spirits' among the Chewa was put forward by Mary Useni at one of the interviews which I had with her. She had this to say:

"The first missionaries taught us not to pray to God through dead relatives because they were dead. They taught us to pray only through Jesus Our Lord because he was the living Son of God. What surprised us most was that gradually saints days were introduced. We were taught that Peter, Paul and others saints were close to God.

We were told that the saints are our guardians and they pray for us. And yet all these were white saints from the first to the last remembered from the beginning of January to the end of December each year. There was no single black saint we could relate to. We wondered how white saints born in England or Rome or in other white country could pray for us total strangers.

We were told that these were saints because they believed in our Lord Jesus Christ and died in his faith and they are now alive. We too said our ancestors were men and women of faith in Chauta because they prayed to Chauta in times of trouble. So we thought we could pray through them."⁶¹

It appears plausible to argue that in the minds of the Chewa of the Upper Shire Valley Chewa ancestral spirits play two-fold roles both of crucial importance in their historical and religious life. First, they link the distant past of the Maravi people with the present and indeed with the future generations. In this way they establish a continuum at the horizontal level between the departed, the living and those yet to be born. To the Chewa an attempt to discourage offerings in honour of the ancestral spirits has always been looked upon as an attempt at destroying this horizontal link with their past and thus become alienated from the rocks from which they were hewn. But far and above Chewa ancestral spirits establish a vertical continuum between Chauta in the spirit world on the one hand and the Chewa nation here on earth on the other. In this sense the ancestral spirits are believed to be the most vital, the closest; and the most reliable link between the worshipping community and Chauta because they are the most sympathetic to the pleas of man in his spiritual and physical needs. As one of my informants put it:

"The first missionaries said this is bad. They said that our ancestors were dead anyway but they forgot one central point that our Lord Jesus Christ also died and yet he is alive. We Africans believe that our ancestors also died but they are still alive. It is they who bore us and brought us up. Certainly their contact with us is very close. We venerate our ancestors not because they are dead but because once dead they are now god-like. They see God.

These are the people whom we saw with our eyes, ate with them and moved about with them. It is these people whom we ask to plead for us. We ask our ancestors to talk to God in our behalf because they are near God and they can speak his language. We talk to them first as a man would talk to a Prime Minister seeking audience with the King or President."⁶²

It appears that in the same way that the Chewa people need their ancestors to speak to God, God, apparently, uses the same channels to speak to the people. But since man cannot speak to God or to the spirits face to face, God is said to cause the ancestral spirits to speak to their descendants in dreams, visions or by means of spirit possession. It is common belief among the Chewa that inspirational possession is possible since man is in himself body and spirit and because of the latter he can thus come under the overpowering spiritual influence. We have already seen that inspirational central spirit possession forms the hallmark of the nature and functions of the Bimbi cult. In the case of the Upper Shire Valley, it is believed, only Chewa territorial spirits who can make God's wishes known to Bimbi in times of drought, epidemics and other ecological crises, and that only he in turn can pass the messages to the senior members of the society.

It should be clear by now why the Chewa approach their ancestral spirits more directly and more often than they approach God. This is not so much because God is too transcendent, absent and unconcerned with human affairs but because of a strong belief that God as king has constituted special agencies through which he can be approached. These agencies are the ancestral spirits. To bypass them would be tantamount to breaking the law laid down by God. In other words it would amount to lack of reverence to the deity, therefore, a serious offence.

This seems self-explanatory. The Chewa appear to perceive life as participation. The source of life is God and those closest to this life-source are the ancestors and participation in the life coming through the ancestors is the only way in which the individual shares the life of God and the community. Cut off from this source man ceases to exist. He is spiritually and socially dead.

CHAPTER 7

MYTH AND HISTORY IN THE BIMBI CULT

a The origin of the Bimbi cult

We do not know for certain who was the founder of the Bimbi cult and when it began. Its beginnings are obscure and shrouded in myth and uncertainties. Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, his officials and the bulk of my informants insistently asserted that the Bimbi cult originated at Kaphirintiwa and that it made its appearance in the Upper Shire Valley as a result of Chewa expansion. They associate it more particularly with the history of the Maravi of the Phiri clan whose state system is said to have flourished in the 16th century and began to decline sometime in 1690's. At the height of its ascendancy, that is, by the early 17th century, the Maravi confederation of states covered the greater part of Eastern Zambia, Central Malawi and Northern Mozambique.¹

The implication of this association between the Bimbi cult, Kaphirintiwa and the Maravi is deep and far reaching, for modern scholarship, as we shall see in the course of this discussion, has indicated that Kaphirintiwa was a reputed religious centre long before the arrival of the Maravi. In the absence of an alternate theory this writer has concluded that the Bimbi cult is Proto-Chewa in nature and that its arrival in the Upper Shire sometime between the 17th and 18th century was a result of Maravi state expansion after the Proto-Chewa had been assimilated in the Maravi state system. This chapter examines this connection and also attempts to reconstruct the history of the cult once it was established in the region.

It is important to point out from the outset that an attempt at reconstructing the history of the

Bimbi cult is bound to face many difficulties. To start with much of the evidence so far available is based on oral traditions which, in most cases, is biased and confusing. Secondly, the majority of my informants tended to telescope events so much that it is difficult to have a chronological picture of the events which accounted for the emergence of this cult, its development, role and expansion.

The Maravi state builders are said to have migrated into the northern Zambezi region from the north west, from Luba (Uluwa) in the land of Mwachi-Yamvo in South-eastern Zaire.² The most accepted theory is that their arrival in the Lake Malawi region took place sometime in the 15th century and that from this century up to the mid 17th century the Maravi established themselves as rulers, they consolidated their state system and spread their dominance and influence to other parts of the region of northern Zambezia.³ This ruling group is said to have comprised the members of the Phiri royal clan to which Kalonga, the Paramount chief of the Chewa belonged. It appears that led by Kalonga Chinkhole and his mother Nyangu Phiri, the Maravi left Luba country after suffering an indignity that cannot be recalled correctly.⁴

During their migration into the Malawi region, the Maravi Phiri royals are said to have first settled at Choma and from there crossed Kalambo River and passed the north-eastern Zambia and entered Malawi from the West. Here the Maravi made their first important settlement at Kasitu near Kaphirintiwa in the Dzalanyama range. It is in this area that the first encounter between the Maravi-Phiri and the Proto-Chewa is believed to have taken place.⁵

According to Bimbi oral tradition recounted to me by Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi; when the Maravi reached Kaphirintiwa:

"they discovered a mysterious stone on which they found all kinds of foot prints of animals - elephants, hyenas, lions and even prints of crawling babies. When they saw this they were amazed. They settled down there and began to ask themselves: 'who created this mysterious stone, was it man or God? How did it come to be here?' Then they began to be possessed by spirits and behave as if they had been bitten by dogs with rabies.

Then people began asking themselves as to what all this meant. Someone said: 'this must be a sacred place, the dwelling place of the spirits and that this mysterious stone is a symbol of this.'

The elders around conferred together and appointed Kapwiti, Nyangu's son to be their priest and to offer sacrifices on their behalf to appease the spirits. Again people chose Mbona to be the High Priest. He too was Nyangu's son.⁶ Mbona told the elders to build a shrine and make beer for an offering. When beer was ready Mbona assumed his high priestly office. He told the people that he was going to disclose the meaning of the mysterious stone:

'Long ago', he said, 'this place was flooded. Only Noah's boat remained intact. When the flood took place all the people and animals fled to this place. This mountain became all mud. When all the people and animals died the waters dried up. The foot prints of animals who fled hither remained on the mud and these stayed on when this mud became a stone. Thus this place or mountain is called Kaphirintiwa. The first man to set foot here was Mchochoma, therefore, I name this mountain Kaphirintiwa-wa-Mchochoma.'

After some years disaster fell upon them. Every day between ten and fifteen people were being killed by lions. Then Kalonga told his nephew Changamile to blow the trumpet and summon all the people to his court. Many people came. Kalonga told them that he was disturbed for seeing many people being killed by lions. He told them that the following morning they would all go to Mtengo-mbalame to drink mwabvi to find out who were responsible for the killings.

Some people met at night secretly. They were Mbona, Lundu, Kapwiti and Tengani. They decided to run away and escape the ordeals of mwabvi since they felt that they themselves were responsible for the disaster. They feared that if they drunk mwabvi they would die. A number of people fled with them south-eastwards to the Lower Shire Valley. When they had left people chose Mchinjika to take over Mbona's priestly functions and act as priest of the Chewa. There is where the Bimbiship began and from there we came here."⁷

It seems plausible to argue that although this myth may not be palpably true historically it does, however, focus on Kaphirintiwa as the cradle of Bimbiship. What is even more significant in the story is that Kaphirintiwa is imputed with religious mysterious powers even before the coming of the Phiri Royals. The newcomers are possessed by these mysterious powers and out of this encounter with these pre-existing spiritual forces we hear that the Bimbi priesthood emerged. The story may be a rationalisation of the way in which the Chewa assimilated Proto-Chewa religion.

The reference to Kaphirintiwa is significant in that it gives the Bimbi cult the religious charter it needs since, quite often, Kaphirintiwa is associated in Chewa mythology as the place where Chiuta first manifested himself after creation.⁸ It is important to bear in mind that Kaphirintiwa appears in Chewa historiography as being the origin of much of Chewa religious institutions in Central and Southern Malawi which go back to the Proto-Chewa times. More specifically these religious institutions are associated with members of the Banda clan who are said to have been reputed rain callers.

One of the dominant theories, and one backed by archaeological evidence, states that between 1200-1400 much of Central Malawi was invaded by a

group of immigrants from the north-west who were responsible for the spread of a new culture.⁹ These groups of people have come to be known as Proto-Chewa and have been identified with the Banda, Mbewe, Mwale, and Zimba peoples who lived in scattered settlements over much of the present Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique.¹⁰ Schoffeleers has indicated that these were segmentary societies of agriculturalists whose political structure was characterised by a network of regional shrines.¹¹

The emergence of a complex system of religious institutions in Central Malawi has been attributed to the fact that the Proto-Chewa were mainly cultivators whose livelihood depended to a great extent on the annual rainfall¹² which is rather uncertain in the area.

Kings Phiri has it that the Proto-Chewa's migration into the country was in fact directed by two rain callers: Mangadzi and Chawa, who first led their followers to Kilwe in Lakeside Tongaland before they spread southward into the modern Chewa heartland of Central Malawi.¹³ It is further pointed out that it was the Proto-Chewa who must have displaced the earliest stone age inhabitants, the Batwa, westwards towards the Lwangwa valley.¹⁴ The Batwa are said to have differed from the Proto-Chewa in one fundamental aspect: they were mainly hunters and food collectors, economic activities which were also reflected in their religion - the Nyau which, according to Schoffeleers must have originated as a form of hunting magic.¹⁵

Since the Proto-Chewa speaking peoples depended primarily on agriculture they eventually evolved a system of rain shrines whose appearance is said to have occurred sometime around 13th century in order to ensure a good supply of rain and avert drought conditions. These shrines became the focus of much religious symbolism and ritual. Schoffeleers maintains that after a period of some two centuries a kind of unique organisation developed which culminated in

the emergence of a central shrine at Kaphirintiwa in the Dzalanyama mountains and whose authority seems to have encompassed all the shrines within the Central Malawi region.¹⁶

A distinctive characteristic of Kaphirintiwa and all other shrines was that they were dedicated to the cult of the High God a distinction which they shared only with the Mwari cult of Southern Shona.¹⁷

It appears that Mangadzi Banda the ritual leader of the Proto-Chewa was the central figure at Kaphirintiwa and that the occupants of that office became a kind of chief medium of the whole religious complex that evolved under her. According to Schoffeleers it was customary at the various shrines to dedicate a middle aged woman to the service of God, who would receive messages from him in a state of ecstasis and relate this to the people. Many of these women are said to have been of the Banda clan who were considered as owners of the land and who lived in permanent celibacy. It seems that the role of these women was purely mediumistic since priestly functions are said to have been generally exercised by members of the Mbewe clan.¹⁸

Chewa historiographers have indicated that in the process of interaction between the Proto-Chewa and the Maravi the latter associated the former into their rank and file. Proto-Chewa religious institutions were institutionalised in the Maravi state system by a combination of sheer use of force and diplomacy. Schoffeleers has observed that:

"At first the newcomers tried to capture the old shrines. Twice did their leader Kalonga Chidzonzi send his war parties up to Kaphirintiwa but each time they were defeated. In the end an arrangement developed under which the early Chewa clans remained prominent in the religious sphere, while the Phiri clan became dominant in political positions."¹⁹

It has further been suggested that once this initial arrangement of peaceful relationship between the Proto-Chewa and the Maravi was reached a period of considerable prosperity for the shrines began. Assured of continued military protection and favoured by the benevolence of the Kalongas and senior Phiri royals the shrine officials moved from Kaphirintiwa to the plains below.²⁰ The move from Kaphirintiwa to Msinja has been attributed to Undi, who after establishing himself at Maano decided to move the shrine to Msinja. This move to Msinja is said to have marked a significant departure in the socio-religious organisation of what was purely Proto-Chewa cult before the arrival of the Phiri. One of the major changes was the setting up of a predominantly Phiri officialdom around the new shrine which considerably curbed the political power of the cult figure Mangadzi Banda who by then became known as Makewana or Make-wa-wana (Mother of all children). Consequently, an elaborate court system with numerous dignitaries evolved. The leading Phiri official in the new organisation was Kamundi Mbewe who assumed the role of Makewana's husband and python, roles which associated him directly with the deity and emphasised his supremacy over Makewana the spirit wife.²¹

The importance of the Msinja centre shrine lay in the fact that it became the religious centre of the Maravi state system. Rangeley has it that Msinja, the new headquarters, grew into a large village as large as a town and was inhabited entirely by Makewana and her religious officials.²² It became a kind of an ecclesiastical centre.

Carlos Wiese, a German official in Portuguese service, is reported to have described the shrine at Msinja as late as 1890 as still being "the Mecca of the Maravi" to which people and notables flocked from far and wide to pray for rain and prosperity in their home areas.²³ Phiri royals appear to have made annual

pilgrimages to the shrine at Msinja or sent high powered representatives there. At other times Makewana is said to have sent her assistants the prophets and rain callers to the various Marave chiefdoms in the region.²⁴

Antonio Rita-Ferreira citing some earlier references has pointed out that the existence of a territorial ritual personage within the Maravi complex of states was made by Inacio Castano Xavier who in 1758 reported as following:

"They also have much veneration of the wind whose driving force is said to be a personage by name Chisumpe."²⁵

Another early reference is said to have been made by an anonymous writer in 1794 in his book titled Description of the Monogamy Empire or the Kalonga beyond the Zambezi in which he wrote:

"There was in the empire a High Priest - the quissumpe - to whom all the chiefs were required annually to send great presents of black cattle for rain. When the delegates came, quissumpe having accepted the gifts sent his sons to various chiefdoms ...

Once there the junior quissumpe waited for the new moon, entered into trance and announced that on such and such a day there will be rain. Sometimes his prophecies became true but at other times he failed."²⁶

Gamitto who visited Maravi country in 1831 is reported to have noted:

"There is a ritual personage to whom they obey and respect attributing to her supernatural powers, whom they call Chisumpe, and is considered by them as prophetess. Her domains comprise a vast territory on which she exercises tremendous power and reap benefits as if it were her own property ... She receives tribute from all even Undi himself and she demands such tributes

whenever she wants them. They believe that she is invisible and immortal, and she is consulted as an oracle in which case she makes herself heard."²⁷

There seem to be great similarities in the way in which the Msinja shrine functioned and the way in which the Bimbi cult functions today. The prophetess at Msinja is said to have been consulted by senior Maravi chiefs whenever a calamity such as war, epidemic disease, drought and famine threatened their populations. During such consultations the prophetess, after a ritual dance, would fall into trance during which the consulting chiefs asked her the pressing questions of their chiefdoms and after which her private attendant interpreted what the prophetess said in her ecstatic state.²⁸

Because of the striking similarities in ritual, structural and priestly organisation between the Makewanaship and the Bimbiship the present writer is of the view that the origin of the Bimbi cult must be sought in the Kaphirintiwa-Msinja religious complex. All oral traditions which I collected in and around Ulongwe affirm that this is the case. It seems plausible to suggest in the face of much oral evidence, that the Bimbis must have been, at the beginning, either Makewana's spirit wives or Makewana's prophets or prophetess sent out to represent her at the Chewa chiefdom at Ulongwe under the Paramountcy of the Lady chief - Nyangu. Oral traditions preserved by Changamile Mdala, one of the senior Malawi royals, maintain that even after their settlement in the Upper Shire Valley the Maravi royals visited Msinja shrine either in person or sent representatives in three or in fours to make mfunde²⁹ and come back for Msinja was the centre of all mfunde. Whenever the Maravi from the Upper Shire Valley visited. Msinja they are said to have been welcomed by Mkonda. Changamire has it that people went to Msinja because it was at Kaphirintiwa where people started offering mfunde for rain.³⁰

b The Bimbi cult in the Upper Shire Valley

It has been argued in the foregoing discussion that the origin of the Bimbi cult must be sought in the religious complex of the Proto-Chewa which centred first at Kaphirintiwa and later at Msinja rain shrine under Makewana. It has been assumed that by a process of assimilation and integration the Maravi people adopted the religious system of the Proto-Chewa into their political system. The vestiges of this assimilation are reflected even in the present day shrine and priestly organisation. Almost 1/3 of the total number of those exercising priestly functions at Bimbi rain shrines are Chewa of the Mbewe clan, while the rest are members of the Phiri clan with a small number of Chewa of the Banda clan.³¹

The emergence of the Bimbi cult in the Upper Shire Valley, in its present form, is attributed to the Maravi policy of state building. It has been indicated by some authorities that because of some friction between the Maravi on the one hand and the Proto-Chewa on the other, the former were forced to abandon Kaphirintiwa and to migrate south-eastwards until they finally settled in the area between the Upper Shire Valley in the south and the Linthipe River in the north. This is credited to be the area to which the name Malawi was originally applied. Here Kalonga established the seat of his administration at Manthimba, but acknowledged Mankhamba, a Proto-Chewa settlement, as his religious centre.³²

The formation of a typical Marave state system has been credited to the statesmanship of Chidzonzi, a matrilineal nephew of Chinkhole. It seems that Chidzonzi was an ambitious leader who wanted to carve out a kingdom for himself. He, therefore, adopted expansionist policies by sending out senior and junior members of the Phiri Royals to colonise adjacent territories. In the immediate vicinity of

Manthimba, Ngangu, the Queen Mother of the Kalongas, among others, is said to have been sent to colonise the Upper Shire Valley.³³

Bimbi oral traditions have identified this Nyangu with Kabuthu. Her husband was Chilembwe. She was assisted by a number of Phiri notables among whom the names of Mpinganjira, Nyani, Phimbi, and Namkumba stand out. Much of the colonisation of the Upper Shire Valley is said to have evolved around the political activities of these people. In their migration from Manthimba area Kabuthu - Nyangu is said to have moved ahead of her group stark naked, with a basket in her hand looking for suitable land for settlement. After sometime in their move southwards they reached a group of mountains which looked like breasts sticking out on the valley. Kabuthu Nyangu named them Mawere-a-Nyangu because she said: 'they look like my breasts, I, therefore, name them "Nyangu's breasts"'.

The same traditions further indicate that it was while at Mawere-a-Nyangu that they saw Lake Malombe at a distance and were induced to go down and settle along the lake area. It was here that the Chewa called themselves Anyanja, that is, people who live along the lake (nyanja). From the mountains they made their first important settlement at Majengo which earned its name because the soil was good for making salt (kuyenga mchele). It was also good for agriculture. From Majengo they moved close to the lakeshore and settled at Mvera west of the Shire River close to Lake Malombe. Once at Mvera the Maravi under Nyangu established themselves as 'owners of the land' and began to spread far and wide.

In order to increase the land under her control Kabuthu-Nyangu dispatched under her command heads of her Phiri royals to take effective control of the land south, north, west and east of Mawere-a-Nyangu. Mpinganjira and his junior members took control of the

land north-west of Lake Malombe. He settled at Chigawe. Nyani and his junior kinsmen colonized much of Zomba district. He established his headquarters at Upper Domasi. Phimbi with the help of other Phiri royals is said to have created a chiefdom in and around Utale. Namkumba moved further north-west to settle where he is now. Nyangu herself settled at Ulongwe and set her headquarters at Mawere-a-Nyangu. This formed the heartland of her chiefdom and herself became paramount.³⁴

David Livingstone who passed through the region sometime in 1858 has documented:

"Part of the Upper Shire Valley has a lady paramount, named Nyangu and in her dominions women rank higher and receive more respectful treatment than their sisters on the hills."³⁵

Thus a hierarchical chiefly state structure was formed at the apex of which was Nyangu. Under her were more senior members of the Phiri ruling kinsmen with a number of junior chiefs directly responsible to them. In this way the Upper Shire Valley came under effective control of the Maravi state builders. Oral traditions are unanimous that at their arrival the area had not yet come under effective colonisation by human beings but only by wild animals.

Bimbi oral traditions maintain that it was while the Chewa were in the process of expansion and taming the land for agriculture that they began to experience great problems. The first problem was lack of rain for their crops. In fact it is said that one of the reasons why they moved from Malawi was because they had problems with rain there and left that place looking for land suitable for agriculture where their crops would thrive. Droughts were recurrent and famine conditions prevailed. Besides, it is alleged that there were frictions between the Chewa and a

population of dwarfs popularly known as Amwandiwonelapati which caused great hardships on the Chewa people. Traditions preserved by Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi have it that,

"when the Chewa reached Mvera Forest they found no other people but the Batwa or amwandiwonela-pati. Whenever people met the Batwa, the Batwa used to ask them: "from where have you seen me?" If people said 'we saw you yond there' they used to be left free. But if they answered 'we saw you right here' the Batwa used to get angry and would kidnap such people and kill them in the Ulongwe forest. The Batwa were a very short people and conscious of their short height.

Then people began to be kidnapped by the Batwa into the Ulongwe forest. Many people disappeared in this way. Everyone was worried because of this. Because of this and persistent dry weather conditions people even thought this land was not good for them.

Then one day one of Kanimwele's sons called Kamtunda was possessed. He ran into Ulongwe forest and stayed there for three months without food. Later on he came back half insane and thin. He summoned all the people to come and see him. When the people were gathered together Kamtunda told them that where he was, in the Ulongwe forest, he had been given a name greater than any other name on earth. It was the name given to the chief of chiefs. He then told all the people to build a shrine under the leadership of Nyangu. Nyangu asked Kamtunda where the shrine should be built. Kamtunda told her to build it under a mvumo tree (*Borrassus aethiopum*) in the Ulongwe forest. He told them that they should call the shrine Ulongwe. Kamtunda then asked Nyangu to give him a young girl (mwali) to be his wife. Then Nyangu became Kamtunda's mother-in-law. When the young girl (mwali) was given to him he told them that the river which passed through the forest should be called mkazi (woman) 'because', he said, 'you have given me a woman (mkazi)'.

Kamtunda charged Nyangu to look after the shrine at Ulongwe properly. He told them that whenever they were in trouble

such as drought, war and epidemics they should come to the shrine and make offerings there and that their troubles would come to an end. He advised them to make offerings for their dead relatives, those who had disappeared in the forest. People did as they were told and their dead relatives came back to life in full view of all.

All people thanked Kamtunda for protecting them and saving them from danger. Thereafter Kamtunda changed his name. He said: 'I am now Mchinjika (one who protects) because I protect the people.' Then it became customary that whenever village headmen saw that their people were in trouble such as drought, epidemics and wars with the Batwa, they went to Mchinjika for help. Mchinjika used to tell the elders to build shrines in their areas to pray there for rain and for the release of their kidnapped relatives. This is how rain shrines spread everywhere all the way to Zomba, east across the Shire³⁶ and as far up as Mangochi country.

This tradition presents many problems of interpretation but two themes seem to be dominant which are important in our present analysis. To start with the historical dimension of this tradition appears to be very important among the Chewa of the Upper Shire Valley for as we shall see later it enhances their land-charter. It will be noted that the account claims that the whole region was uninhabited except by the Batwa who lived by hunting and gathering. They did not have the technology to tame the land for the purposes of agriculture and permanent settlements. It was the arrival of the Maravi-Phiri and their effective occupation of the area which changed much of the face of the land and led to a well organised form of government and flourishing agriculture.

J.B. Webster, in his examination of the Batwa tradition with whom the Maravi are said to have come into contact, has indicated that the most favoured and perhaps the most congenial interpretation of the

interaction between the Batwa and the Chewa is that since hunters and gatherers did not claim land and have disappeared anyway, it is safe enough for the present Chewa populations to argue that their ancestors were the first agriculturalists to arrive in the area, therefore, they are owners of the soil.³⁷

Another theme which emerges out of this tradition seems to be an attempt to explain the causes for the emergence of the cult in the area and how rain shrines spread among Chewa chiefs. Those elders who were given the power to own shrines were also given authority to invoke spiritual powers which lay behind these shrines and which were believed to have power to ward off dangers such as drought, epidemics and possible wars with their enemies. Eventually the shrine at Ulongwe became a centre of religious activities to which all the elders owning shrines in their areas turned for spiritual help.

The Chewa of the Upper Shire claim that their ancestors were primarily agriculturalists. According to village headman Foster Ngona Nazinomwe the Chewa ancestors were not skilled either in war or trade. They were not good traders compared to either the Yao or the Bisa. They were however, good farmers. Their involvement in regional trade consisted of exchanging iron hoes for salt or calico and other perishable goods. Their involvement in the international trade came about after they formed a partnership with the Yao. As a result of this partnership the Chewa are said to have travelled to Mbwanzi Chiwambo (East Coast) to exchange ivory tusks and slaves for salt, cloth, guns and gunpowder from the Yao.³⁸

The Chewa also claim that their ancestors were great fishermen as their descendants are today. They were skilled in net making. Those around lakes Malawi, Malombe and Chirwa used to catch plenty of fish which helped them to survive during the time of drought and famine.³⁹

These economic activities depended primarily on weather conditions, especially the availability of rain and the movement of wind in the waters. This being the case it seems natural that the Chewa reverted to religious rituals to affect the course of these natural phenomena and in the case of the Upper Shire the Bimbi became the central figure of such ritual activities, which in a sense reflected their agricultural concerns as well as fishing.

The earlier Bimbis and their life histories

Bimbi oral accounts insist that the first Bimbi to make his appearance in the Ulongwe area was, as we have already seen, Kamtunda who, it is alleged, was a member of the Phiri clan.⁴⁰ After his spirit possessions in the forest he is said to have changed his name from Kamtunda to Mchinjika.⁴¹ He was the son of Kanimwele who, according to the genealogy given to me by Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, was Kabuthu-Nyangu's elder sister.⁴² Nothing much is known about Mchinjika and the historicity of his Bimbiship is difficult to establish. All that is known about him from oral accounts is that he was a great cult figure and that he belonged to the Phiri royal clan. It is very likely that before him, the Bimbis may have originally belonged to either the Banda or the Mbewe clans. This would tend to render support to the view that ruling members of the Phiri clan, depended on the Banda and Mbewe for ritual services. At Msinja, as we have already seen, the Phiri invaders had Mangadzi Banda and Kamundi Mbewe as religious functionaries and in the Manthimba-Mankhamba area, the Kalonga relied on Chikaole Banda and Mbuzimaere Mbewe.⁴³

According to Bimbi historical texts Mchinjika seems to have been in power from about 1807 to 1837. Village headman Masaula has indicated that oral

traditions preserved in his lineage assert that whenever the Chewa were in trouble in their farming activities, they always went to Ulongwe to consult Bimbi Mchinjika and ask him to help them in their plight and protect their crops.⁴⁴

After his death he was succeeded by Mwangalileni-Mtsamila I, a female Bimbi. Her mother was Thindi. Thindi was Kamtunda-Mchinjika I's sister.⁴⁵ She was born at Majengo where she lived until the time of her call to Bimbiship. As a cult figure she was assisted by a number of elders namely Akuchilunda also known as Msungu, Kasenjera, Chimombo and Chipojola. Her time was dominated with the events of Ngoni invasion which led to her death and the destruction of the shrine at Ulongwe. By most accounts Mtsamila I was a very famous cult figure which made her an easy target for attack.

According to S.S. Murray, in November 1835 the Ngoni crossed the Zambezi between Zumbo and Tete under Zwangendaba in their flight from Shaka, the Zulu statesman of the 19th century South Africa. He further asserts that immediately after crossing a chief named Mputa broke away from Zwangendaba with his army and followers to Domwe mountain in what was then Portuguese territory south west of Lake Malawi. This branch of the Ngoni is said to have soon subjected the Malawi people living there and took possession of the country. But this did not last for long for having followed their method of training warriors among the conquered people they soon moved off with reinforced army, to the rich cattle lands of the Matengo peoples in Tanganyika whom they easily conquered and subdued.⁴⁶

J.B. Webster has pointed out that in 1846 the Maseko Ngoni, as they were known under Mputa, passed round south of Lake Malawi on their way to the Songea region in southern Tanzania. There they soon met the Gwangwala Ngoni who had left Ufipa country in 1848. This encounter resulted in a tragic clash

in the 1850's between the Maseko and the Gwangwala.⁴⁷ It is very likely that this and the impotence of the Maseko Ngoni to withstand the military pressure of the Gwangwala Ngoni prompted the former to embark on an exodus southwestwards into the Upper Shire Valley under the leadership of Chidyaonga and ultimately settled in the Dedza region. Mputa is said to have been killed in a raiding expedition against a local people near Lihuhu River.⁴⁸ Bridglal Pachai has indicated that Chidyaonga brought back his people from Songea from about 1855 to 1870.⁴⁹ I am tempted to think that the brunt of their presence was felt in the Upper Shire by mid 1860's and this falls well within the time when Mwangalileni Mtsamila I was in power as Bimbi. According to Bimbi genealogy Mtsamila I seems to have been in power from about 1837 to 1867.⁵⁰

Both Chewa and Yao traditions assert that Mtsamila I was an outspoken prophetess in the region whose fame went beyond the confines of her spiritual chiefdom into the adjacent areas. This might have attracted the Ngoni's attention and prompted them to come to Ulongwe to kill her. The Maseko Ngoni invasion which led to the death of Mtsamila appears both in Yao and Chewa traditions. All my Ngoni informants in the Upper Shire claim that there are no traditions among the Ngoni which show that any of the Bimbis was at one time or other killed by the Ngoni. According to the present day Ngoni generation it is almost unthinkable that the Ngoni could kill a ritual figure who ensured agricultural success in the land. To make matters even more difficult, Joseph Douglas M'manga, one of the junior Phiri royals, whose ancestors are said to have led the Ngoni from Liwonde (Ferry) to Ulongwe to kill Mtsamila I, claims that there are no such traditions in his lineage. According to him this is very unlikely because chief M'manga of the time and Mtsamila I were great

friends since they were kin. M'manga could not have led the Ngoni to go and kill his cult leader.⁵¹ However, Chewa and Yao traditions assert that the Ngoni under Chidyaonga killed Mtsamila I and destroyed the shrine. At one of the interviews I had with Tambala Mwedadi Chitenjele he recounted to me the following tradition:

"There were wars here between the Ngoni and the Yao caused by the death of Mtsamila I. This land as you know was first inhabited by the Nyanja. Mtsamila was a Nyanja woman who had great fame. She was living at Ulongwe. She was both a chief and rain-caller. When the Ngoni heard about her they decided to come to Ulongwe and kill her. When they reached Ferry (Liwonde) they found Mmanga and Kusapa there. These two were Nyanja chiefs. The Ngoni asked them to take them down to Mtsamila, 'because', they said 'we want to see this famous lady'..

When they reached where Mtsamila was, the Ngoni killed her and burnt the shrine. This is how the war started. The Nyanja invited Kawinga and Liwonde to help them fight the Ngoni who had just killed their leader. Kawinga and Mposa went as far as Kongwe pursuing the Ngoni. This is how they came to settle down at Kongwe."⁵²

This tradition seems to agree with the official account of the events recounted to me by the present Bimbi who put it thus:

"Sometime after Mchinjika's death, he was succeeded by Mtsamila I. She was female Bimbi. Mtsamila I uttered a prophecy:
'Half naked people are coming here to wage war. I myself do not want to see them. You must all run away to Chilumba on the lake.'

Mtsamila warned all the people that she was going to be killed by the Ngoni and that the people should not fight back because the Ngoni would respond by

killing many innocent people. So many people fled to Chilumba. When the Ngoni reached Mmanga's village at Ferry they asked chief Mmanga and Kusapa to lead them to Mtsamila. Mmanga and Kusapa did so. They led the Ngoni to Mtsamila. When the Ngoni reached Ulongwe they found a few people there. They asked them where Mtsamila was. They were shown where she was. But by the time they entered Mtsamila's shrine they found her already dead in her sleep. However, they cut off her head and threw it in the water. Having cut Mtsamila's head off the Ngoni went to Kaweya. They slept there. All the Nyanja gathered together and decided to fight against the Ngoni at Kaweya. They woke up early in the morning with arrows, clubs and sticks to fight the Ngoni at Kaweya. They fought them there and killed many of them there at night. The attack was sudden and the Ngoni were not able to defend themselves. They were chased as far as Boola and Mtakataka."⁵³

The absence of other sources to substantiate these two independent but similar traditions pose some difficulties of historical interpretation. However, they seem to reveal the nature of the attitude of the Maseko Ngoni towards Chewa religious institutions. They also show the pattern with which the Ngoni dealt with their religious opponents. The present writer is of the view that the death of Mtsamila I and the destruction of the Bimbi shrine at Ulongwe may well have taken place sometime between 1865-1870. This is deduced from the fact that this period witnessed the time when the Ngoni appear to have gone on a rampage destroying Chewa religious establishments. For instance, the early 1870's witnessed the destruction of Makewana's shrine at Msinja. According to W.H.J. Rangeley, in the 1870's a raid by the Maseko Ngoni under Chidyaonga from Domwe utterly smashed up Msinja town. Those people who could escape did so by fleeing into the bush. The rest, however, were

either killed or captured and the whole village was burnt. The prophetess herself is said to have escaped death. She ran away for her life to the north never to be seen again.⁵⁴

It appears to me that the attack on Mtsamila must have been both a political venture designed to destroy the political power of the Chewa which seem to have evolved around the cult after the Maravi system fragmented into petty chiefdoms without central authority and therefore a likely source for Chewa resistance, and as an economic venture to capture the ivory tusks which Mtsamila is said to have amassed in her shrine from the hunting and trading activities of her people.⁵⁵

One of the questions which need to be asked is why the Maseko Ngoni were bent on destroying Chewa religious systems. W.E. Rau has suggested that the cause may lie in the fact that the long period of migration which the Ngoni experienced shaped and sharpened not only their military and political structures but also their belief systems. According to Rau, Ngoni religious systems at this point in time characterised by minor emphasis on ritual attachment to the land or to deities whose locations were geographically defined since they had no prospects of establishing themselves in one particular area.⁵⁶

Ngoni's military existence accounted for their failure to live in one place long enough to allow them adopt the religious shrines or beliefs of incorporated peoples.⁵⁷ Instead religious life centred on ancestral spirits of the paramount chiefs who had conquered the land.⁵⁸ Rau has indicated that an elaborate and highly ritualised system of religion was absent among the Ngoni, particularly in contrast to the ritual and spiritual attachment to the land of the people who came into contact with them.⁵⁹

It seems plausible to argue that the Bimbi cult was to the Maseko Ngoni a religious system which

had nothing to play in their political system and something which they had either to absorb within their political system or to destroy. The latter course seemed to be the best at the time.

But the death of Mtsamila I and the destruction of the centre shrine at Ulongwe did not cripple the Bimbi cult altogether for according to Bimbi traditions when Mtsamila I died she was succeeded almost immediately by Timang'amba Bimbi. The new Bimbi's mother was Namkungwi. Namkungwi is said to have been Mtsamila I's daughter.⁶⁰ Traditions have it that after the birth of Namkungwi and her brother Pemba there was civil strife among the Chewa at Ulongwe the causes of which are not recalled at all by my informants. We do not also know the factions involved and the scale of the conflict. What is maintained is that as a result of that conflict Namkungwi ran away for safety to Mulanje to Kalitera at a place called Chiperoni. Kalitera is said to be on the other side of Ruo River in Mozambique. While there she met a man with whom she married. His name was Gogo. Gogo was Mtombosera's son. There she bore two sons Timang'amba and che-Yanji.⁶¹

From Mulanje, Gogo, his wife and their two sons decided to move up to Ulongwe where Namkungwi had come from. From Mulanje they made their first settlement at Songani near Lake Chirwa in chief Chimbalinga's area. While at Chirwa Gogo married three other women namely Kumichila who bore a son called Majawa; Ulemu and Thamangalileni. Then after sometime Gogo and his wives and children left Songani and went to Ulongwe and settled on the eastern side of Nkasi River. At that time Mtsamila I is said to have been still alive.⁶²

Timang'amba Bimbi is said to have acquired his Bimbiship by spirit possession almost immediately after Mtsamila's death possibly to meet the demands of the time. He may have ruled from about 1867 to

1927 according to Bimbi regnal list. He seems to have had the longest reign of all the Bimbis so far known in oral traditions. J.B. Webster has indicated that long reigns like this are not unknown in the history of mankind the best example being that of Queen Victoria whose reign seems to have lasted for more than sixty years.⁶³

Soon after his assumption to Bimbiship and basing himself on past experiences, Timang'amba Bimbi who is also popularly known as Mchinjika, must have realised the futility of a protracted war with the Ngoni single handed. "The distinct advantage the Ngoni enjoyed over the Chewa", Rau writes, "was not due to more efficient weapons but a more highly organized military and political system. They were organized as a military society and their army had a high degree of success over the Chewa."⁶⁴ The Ngoni are said to have rated the Chewa as cowardly, unorganised, passive and generally inferior.⁶⁵

In view of such a strong enemy, the Chewa under the leadership of Timang'amba, appealed to the Yao chiefs more particularly to Liwonde and Kawinga for military help to drive the Ngoni away. The Yao, as is well known, claim to have come from Yao Hill in Mozambique.⁶⁶ According to E.A. Alpers the exact location of the area of their origin in relation to their migration into Malawi is said to be bound approximately by the rivers Lucheringo to the west, Luwambala to the south, Lugenda to the east and Rovuma to the north.⁶⁷ From there they were pushed by a combination of factors such as famine, the attacks of the Lomwe upon their homeland, and the desire to benefit from direct trade links with the country laying to their west.

It is important to bear in mind that the Yao entered Malawi not as a single group but as different groups under individual chiefs. Those under Liwonde and Kawinga, who concern us directly here, are said

to have been driven westwards into Malawi by famine occasioned by a drought which hit the northern Mozambique area at the end of the 18th century or beginning of the 19th. According to Webster this drought propelled hordes of Makua invaders into ku-Yao seizing food and capturing slaves.⁶⁹ In Malawi, Liwonde and Kawinga, who are also known as the Mbewe, had a more direct impact on the Upper Shire Valley than any other Yao groups. They entered the area as great warriors who had fought and displaced a number of other Yao groups while migrating from Mozambique. For example, they fought and defeated Mkata in the Mangochi Hills. From there they moved on to Maiwa and then crossed the Shire at Chigawe on their way to the west. The traditions further maintain that after turning Mambo and Mponda into tributary chiefs they embarked on an unprecedented military conquest which brought the whole of the Upper Shire Valley under their domain. In these wars, Kawinga was the campaign leader while Liwonde played the role of a ritualist, thereby ensuring success of every battle fought and was entrusted with the reconstruction of conquered chiefdoms and the building up of a strong Mbewe chiefdom.⁶⁹

It appears that at the time of the death of Mtsamila I, Liwonde and Kawinga were already in the vicinity of Bimbi heartland near Lake Malombe where they were reported by David Livingstone in 1861. He writes:

"Finding a few people on the evening of the 20th of August who were supporting a wretched existence on tamarinds and mice, were ascertained that there was no hope of our being able to buy food anywhere nearer than the lakelet Pamalombe where the Ajawa chief Kainka was now living."⁷⁰

Timang'amba Bimbi's appeal to Liwonde and Kawinga for

military help against the Ngoni seems to have been based on a number of factors. To start with, the Chewa might have realised the military prowess of the Yao. Webster has pointed out that already by 1830's the Yao had evolved a military tradition only matched by that of the Ngoni.⁷¹ This being the case the Mbewe seem to have been in the right position to play the role of protectors for the Chewa who lost no time but to seek their political and military protection. It has also been suggested that the Chewa may have preferred to come under Yao military and political protection because the Chewa were culturally similar to the Yao and culturally very different from the Maseko Ngoni.⁷²

According to Bimbi oral tradition the elders who were directly involved in the negotiations on the Chewa side were Nyenvu, Namkwakwalala, Chimombo, Chipojola and Kwilinga. The terms of this military alliance is said to have consisted of a token of 200 slaves men and women given by the Chewa to Liwonde and Kawinga in the event of victory. In the wars that erupted between the Maseko Ngoni on the one hand and the Chewa-Liwonde-Kawinga alliance on the other, the Ngoni were forced to retreat and their raids were checked. The war took Kawinga to Kongwe where he settled for military and economic reasons.⁷³

Meanwhile Liwonde, who is also known in Liwonde historical texts as Kanjerenjere (Slim), settled at Chilanga on the western side of the Shire River. According to Liwonde regnal list he seems to have been in power from about 1864 to 1894 and this falls well within Timang'amba Bimbi's reign.⁷⁴ At the end of the war, Timang'amba Bimbi is said to have made a formal recognition and submission to Liwonde's military and political superiority in secular matters. Peaceful terms of the settlement were worked out. This settlement, it is assumed, was made at Chilanga where Liwonde Kanjerenjere lived. At the Chilanga agreement,

Timang'amba Bimbi acknowledged chief Liwonde as paramount in political matters, while Liwonde, on his part, reaffirmed his recognition of the Bimbi's superiority in spiritual matters.⁷⁵

It appears that once Liwonde and Bimbi worked out their terms of agreement the Bimbi cult became a kind of state religion within the Mbewe chiefdoms and the Bimbi shrine at Ulongwe became the centre of worship for the Chewa and Yao alike. A number of other Yao chiefs followed Liwonde's example and acknowledged Bimbi as their ritual leader. In turn Bimbi gave some of them the honour of maintaining their own rain shrines. This was essentially so in case of chief Liwonde who in fact became a kind of patron for the Bimbi shrine. According to Liwonde oral traditions once this formal agreement was achieved, Kanjerenjere appointed his son, Mbwana Liwonde, as his representative in his dealings with Bimbi. It was him who used to be sent to attend milawe ceremonies and report the results to his father. Bimbi, on his part, appointed Akuchilunda popularly known as Msungu as his political representative in the affairs of the Mbewe chiefdoms.⁷⁶

It has been postulated that by recognising Bimbi's spiritual pre-eminence, Liwonde gained a lot by enlisting the support of otherwise resentful Chewa chiefs whom the force of arms alone could not win. Liwonde and Timang'amba Bimbi established close working ties but there was no attempt on either side to integrate with the other, for example, through marriage. In addition to this there was no question of interferring in affairs of succession of one group by the other. Each of them kept his own identity.⁷⁷

As regards all the other Yao chiefs: Mponda, Msamala, Kalembo, Malemia, Mlumbe and others, they too accorded Timang'amba Bimbi a great deal of spiritual recognition. Whenever there was drought they sent high-powered delegations to consult Bimbi or

went to see him themselves. They are all said to have paid him tribute of spiritual allegiance. They brought to him tusks of elephants with which he used to decorate the inside of his shrine.⁷⁸ Each year these chiefs were required to consult Bimbi about the prospects of the coming rainy season. In October or November they sent their village headman to Bimbi who then issued instructions as to when sacrifices could be made at the local shrines. No chief no matter how high his rank was allowed or could arrogate to himself the right to make beer for rain without prior consultation with Bimbi. It seems that though it was possible to defy Bimbi, no chief ever dared to challenge him openly. This is because Bimbi, as a climatic specialist, was believed to have powers to induce or withhold rain for the crops and to abate the storms so that fishermen who went out to sea could have a good catch.⁷⁹ Consequently, Timang'amba Bimbi's position grew in stature and a very intricate system of communication between him and the Yao chiefs was introduced. All direct contacts with Bimbi had to be initiated through one of his cult councillors who acted as his spokesman. This important position, as we have already seen, was held by Kumalekano.⁸⁰

It is interesting to note that there are striking similarities between the way the Yao related themselves to the Bimbi cult and the way in which the Ndebele related themselves to the Mwari religious complex. According to N.M. Bhebe one of the factors which led the Ndebele to adopt the Mwari cult was their impotence to realise their religious goals. Being away from Zululand, so Bhebe argues, the Zulu were cut off from their sacred places and their prayers for rain conducted in the absence of royal graves lost some of their significance and effectiveness. He further argued that since rain-calling among the people of South African depended on the study of clouds

and other forecasts of the weather to account for its success, the Ndebele lost their centuries long experience when they moved into the Shona country which was drought prone.

The Shona, as owners of the land, are said to have had not only the advantage of being profoundly conversant with the natural environmental problems and possibilities of Matabeleland, but they also had a far better developed concept of the supernatural than the Ndebele. The cult that grew around Mwari was well organised and related to the people by means of a system of priests.⁸¹ Terence Ranger has it that the Ndebele, therefore, anxious to be on good terms with the God of the land, sent regular tribute to the Mwari shrine though Mzilikazi and Lobengula were careful to restrict the influence of the cult as much as they could.⁸² As regards the Yao in the Upper Shire Valley, they too, like their counterparts - the Ndebele - seem to have lost, apparently, much of their spiritual power when they left ku-Yao cut off from the graves of their ancestral spirits which formed the basis of much of their ritual activities. Once in the Upper Shire Valley, Yao ancestral spirits and the rituals made in their name seem to have become impotent and could only operate at the mercy of the spirits of the land who, by virtue of being peoples of the soil were far more strong and more effective as a spiritual link between the physical world and the world of the spirits.

Moreover the Yao had to come to terms with a new concept of God different from the God of their fathers. They must have realised that a God of war, strong and mighty in battle, was not good enough in a protracted agricultural life which depended primarily on the fertility of the land and its produce. This could only be realised by making appeals to Mulungu who was more particularly concerned with rain as a means of granting life to his people and this is

the type of God they found among the Chewa whose ancestral spirits were but his representatives.

Furthermore, the Bimbi cult as a well organised and highly centralised religious cult with a definite priesthood, well elaborate rituals and its well spread land rain shrines, was not match to the Yao religious system which was rather fluid and simple. To crown it all, the Yao's climatic experiences in ku-Yao in the study of clouds and the other forecasts of the weather may have been limited because of their emphasis in hunting and war activities as a means of securing food and they were even more limited when they moved into the Malawi littoral. Consequently they appear to have had no choice but to give in to the skills and abilities displayed by Timang'amba Bimbi and his cult leaders which could at least be displayed once every year. In this context it seems plausible to assume that although the Chewa lost much of their political power to the Yao they, as a matter of fact, conquered the Yao through their religion. This gave rise to politics of compromise in which the Yao chiefs as political heads ruled and the Chewa as a ritual class in the person of Bimbi as their spiritual head reigned.

It must have been particularly difficult for Timang'amba Bimbi to give up much of the political influence which he must have enjoyed as a spiritual figure. By most accounts from people who actually saw him, some of whom I interviewed, Timang'amba Bimbi is said to have been a threatening figure. He was thin and rather black in complexion. He used to have a beard. His behaviour is said to have been marked with signs of constant spirit possession and he used to be possessed by fierce spirits.⁸³ When he became Bimbi he set up a village for himself on the western bank of the Shire River five miles south of Mvera. He named it Mponda-wa-Bimbi and set up his shrine in the Mponda.

Forest.⁸⁴ The following account given to me by Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, his grandson, is revealing of Timang'amba's personality:

"My grandfather, Timang'amba Bimbi, was thin and slightly tall. I saw him myself and he used to play with me and put me on his laps. I think I was seven years old by the time he died. He was very famous and awe inspiring. He had a very big village. He was a very rough and tough man. None dared to come and see him in person. He used to deal with his people and chiefs through his councillors. My grandfather was a difficult man to deal with.

Sometimes he used to instruct his young men to beat any person who happened to pass through the village with less respect in order to instil in them a sense of fear that Mponda-wa-Bimbi was not a village to play with. Whenever such people came to complain to him about this, he used to pretend that he did not know that such things were happening in his village and would scold his boys severely.

Many village headmen around Machinga and Mangochi used to give him great respect. His village was a kind of crossroad because a number of trade routes passed through it. Village headmen and chiefs including Liwonde, Mponda, Msamala and Chingwalungwalu used to give him gifts for his services and also in order to allow their men free passage.

When people prepared beer in their villages they brought some to my grandfather early in the morning as a gift. He used to drink a lot with his councillors and when drunk he used to call them all sorts of names.⁸⁵ He used to call himself Nkholi-nkholi as a slip of his tongue instead of saying 'I am the son of Gogo'.

Fishermen too used to bring him plenty of fish for his services for predicting the weather for them. He did not engage himself in farming because at harvest people in the villages round about brought him baskets full of maize as gifts in recognition for his services as a

rain-caller. Hunters too used to bring to him elephant tusks. Chiefs did the same. My grandfather used to decorate his house with these.

As a well known person, he normally sat on a lion's skin which people brought to him whenever a lion was killed. His village at Mponda was very big. It grew out of slavery. In those days people used to sell one another into slavery and my grandfather had many domestic slaves both men and women. Some of these women he took them as his wives.

If people killed a python (nsato) there could be severe drought and my grandfather always knew the cause of the drought. Whenever the people who killed the python were known, he would demand that an indemnity be paid to him. This indemnity was paid in the form of either a man or a woman or both. When these people came to Mponda-wa-Bimbi they were settled down in the village and became full members in the life of the village.

In those days when village headmen and chiefs came to consult my grandfather they brought with them a boy or a girl as fees for his services. These boys and girls were settled down in the village while others were exchanged for cloth and other goods. In this way my grandfather's village grew bigger and bigger. This system was stopped when the white government was set up. All his councillors had their houses in Mponda village to help him in his rituals for rain."⁸⁶

According to Kudawe Chiwere, Timang'amba Bimbi was an amazing spiritual figure. He used to command the clouds to rain.⁸⁷ Kungwalu Yasini has it that Mchinjika II as he was known popularly, did not move too much except around his house and to his farm where people did much of farming work for him. He was very powerful and very influential.⁸⁸ Archdeacon Christopher B. Eyre who passed Bimbi area sometime in 1908, though he does not mention Timang'amba Bimbi by name, speaks of him as a man of influence. He writes:

"Mbtembwe-chief Mbimbi ... the chief is a rain-maker and though friendly to the Mission, no doubt his influence has hitherto prevented any great progress being made."⁸⁹

Timang'amba Bimbi seems to have been very active during the colonial period as evidenced by H.S. Stannus. He reports that

"In January, 1907 there was drought in Fort Johnson (Mangochi), so the chief Mponda and all his headmen visited a man called Bimbi (bimbi=prophet), a lesser chief, to ask for rain. They all adjourned to the forest where Bimbi received them outside a hut and having taken their presents, 50 yards of calico or less, he entered his hut and for a quarter of an hour went through certain incantations. He then appeared again and asked what was wanted. He was asked to give them rain.

After again entering the hut and conferring with the spirits he announced rain for a certain day; this was received with the clapping of hands and then everyone lay down prone with the hands by the face and the head towards the hut. The spirits are said to be male and female. God is said to speak to these, these to Bimbi and Bimbi to the people. Rain did not fall on the day mentioned but soon afterwards."⁹⁰

One of the episodes well remembered during the time of Timang'amba involved a man called Kapendeka. Oral traditions preserved by abiti Juma have it that Kapendeka was a Chewa from Mponda-wa-Bimbi village. He was a witch. Once he stopped the rain. When people went to consult Bimbi he told them that the rain had been stopped by Kapendeka. He told them to catch him, duck him in cold water and shave his head bare. When they did this the rain came. Kapendeka was asked why he stopped the rain. He told them that he did so because Bimbi was not prepared to share his political power with him, though he was

his nephew.⁹¹

Timang'amba Bimbi is said to have helped people not only in times of drought but also in times of epidemics for at that time western medicine was not yet available. Mpango wadi Msilo has indicated that people, both Yao and Chewa, consulted Bimbi whenever there was an outbreak of epidemics such as small-pox, influenza, and skin ulcers. In such cases Bimbi used to advise the chiefs to make masanje at the chiefs' courts. Masanje was food prepared at the chief's bwalo (court yard) as children in play. All village headmen and their people were invited to come and eat masanje. When the eating was over the women used to sweep the fire places, remove the mafuwa (stones used for resting cooking pots on fire normally three), the rest of the food, and the firewood and throw them away at a malekano (crossroad). This was symbolic of driving the epidemic away. After the chiefs made their masanje, they advised their village headmen to have masanje in their respective villages.⁹² In cases of severe epidemic such as small-pox, Bimbi used to advise the people of entire villages to abstain from sexual intercourse. In order to ensure that this was strictly observed orders were given that husband and wife should not sleep together in the same house for a certain period until the epidemic was over. To this effect all the men of one village would be put together in small groups of five or seven people and asked to sleep together in one room. Constant watch was kept in order to ensure not one of the men would slip out to go and sleep with his wife and have sexual intercourse with her. Those who were found to break this taboo were severely reprimanded and ostracised.⁹³ It was common belief in those days, as it is still believed in the Bimbi cult today, that sexual intercourse tends to help spread epidemic among the people. In this way a certain standard of morality is achieved.

When epidemics were mild, Timang'amba Bimbi used to tell the village headmen concerned to tell their people to wear pieces of zisong'ontho (empty cobs of maize) on their wrists. A hole was made through them and a string passed through the hole and worn. They could be worn for three or more days until the epidemic disappeared.⁹⁴

Sometimes wild pigs used to devastate peoples' crops in the gardens. In this case Bimbi would ask the people to retire from their gardens not later than 4.00pm saying that he would send his dogs to kill the pigs. Then at night lions used to come and kill the pigs. My informants told me that the lions were called dogs because they were used by the ancestral spirits as if they were dogs whom they sent over to kill the pigs as a man would do with real dogs.

There are traditions which indicate that Timang'amba Bimbi once found himself in the hands of the white government. According to Dunfren Kachire, the white administrators took Bimbi and imprisoned him at the administrative headquarters at Liwonde under the pretext that he was a fake and that he was cheating and leading people astray. They subjected him to severe questioning but Bimbi stood firm declaring himself the prophet of the Chewa. He was not afraid of the whites. In this way the whites gave in and allowed him to operate as before. Since then the Bimbis have been acting as such without hindrance provided they maintained the status quo.⁹⁵

Timang'amba Bimbi was a polygamist. He was converted neither to Christianity nor to Islam. According to Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, Timang'amba had ten wives namely aKusano, aKuchimweso, aMwasunga, aKulaisi, aChiphaulendo, aKumankhumba, aKabechele, Chembolemani, aMalia also known as aMswala-a-kundodo.⁹⁶ For this analysis, only two of these wives interest us most here. At one of the interviews I had with

abiti Juma, she indicated that aKutsano was Timang'amba's first wife. The name itself is suggestive that she was Timang'amba's spirit wife. This is inferred from the fact that the grave yard is sometimes known in Chichewa as matsano and those living there, the spirits, are sometimes called akutsano or akumatsano that is 'those of the grave yard' or more precisely 'the spirits themselves'. W.H.J. Rangeley has pointed out that personal attendants of Makewana at Msinja were in fact known as matsano which is interpreted as 'servants of Chauta' or as 'spirits of the grave yard'. They were also known as akazi a Makewana (Makewana's wives) though Makewana was said to be asexual.⁹⁷ The importance of aKutsano is that she bore a son who was called Mkwanda who later became the father of Swaleyi Mkwanda the present Bimbi. He was Timang'amba's first born son.⁹⁸

Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi has it that aKutsano, his grandmother, was born at Makanga on the eastern side of the Shire River and not far away from the river opposite Mponda forest.⁹⁹

Another important figure among Timang'amba's wives was aMala. She was his second wife. According to Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, aMala and aKuchimweso were Chibalala's sisters. Chibalala himself is said to have been Nyangu's grandson. There is evidence which indicates that the Chibalala lineage was related to Nyangu as shown in the following colonial report in the Upper Shire District Book. It reads:

"The Nyanja were the original inhabitants of the Shire Valley ... a timid agricultural people ... the paramount chief of the Anyanja in those days was Nyangu a woman who lived at Ulongwe - of her descendants, Chibalala, her son, still lives on the Liwawasi River where he has a considerable village."¹⁰⁰

aMala came from Mkanda village on the eastern side of

Nkasi River. Timang'amba is said to have married her by a system called kulowola, that is, he paid a dowry for her. Out of the marriage between Timang'amba Bimbi and aMala a daughter was born. Her name was Akumbirika.¹⁰¹ All my informants asserted that Timang'amba had many children. Some of these were Sululu, Nelson, Tambe, Kagwa Brahim and Auleje-wao. All of these children are now dead. Traditions recounted to me by Kudawe Chiwere has it that during the last days of his life Timang'amba wanted that his son Mkwanda should succeed him to Bimbiship but his plans failed.¹⁰²

We have no accounts of how Timang'amba Bimbi died, but Bimbis are believed not to die in the manner that ordinary people do. They die in a state of spirit possession. Whether this was the case with Timang'amba we just do not know. His burial, however, is surrounded with stories typical of a religious figure. One of these states that when Timang'amba died, people buried him on dry ground. The spirits however were angry, whereupon they demanded that the body be exhumed, put in a dugout canoe and taken to the Shire River for burial. This was done. When the dugout canoe reached the middle of the river the spirits demanded that the body be lowered in the water. Suddenly, heads of would be men-spirits appeared with their hands up ready to receive the body. The body was lowered into the water and the spirits received it. There were voices of people ululating in the Makanga forest rejoicing that this was done according to the spirits' wishes. At night those who carried the operation did not sleep. They kept on hearing voices saying 'mwachita bwino' (you have done well).¹⁰³

After Timang'amba's death, his nephews led by Kumalekano devised a plan whereby all of Timang'amba's wives were sent back to their respective villages together with their children for fear that the spirit

of Bimbiship might possess anyone of his children since the choice came at random. Kumalekano is said to have hated the way in which the spirits chose their successors. He more particularly hated the idea of female Bimbis. It would be misleading, however, to overemphasise the idea that Timamgamba's wives were sent back to their villages solely because of the question of succession. For it is customary among the Chewa that at the death of one of the partners in marriage a ceremony called ku-sudzula (to finish and let go) takes place. After a month of someone's death a small amount of beer is prepared. This initial offering is called matapata intended to mean that the dead body in the grave is rotten - tapata (to rot). On the day in which matapata is offered the undertakers clean the grave and arrange the grave yard of the deceased. This is the sign that members outside the extended family should go back to their respective villages and not join the community of mourners within the extended family of the departed. After sometime another mortuary offering is made this time on a large scale. According to abiti Juma beer made at this time symbolises "tears of the mourning community - misozi" - and is intended to mean that the period of mourning is over.¹⁰⁴ The main ritual at this ceremony consists of kusudzula chikwati (to finish the marriage and let the survivor free to marry again) and also to sort out the question of inheritance of the property of the deceased. Normally after kusudzula chikwati the ex-wives or husbands are advised to return to their villages. In situations where a dowry was paid, the children of the deceased are by common law required to live in their father's village.

What surprised people most in the Malekano case is that Akumbirika, who was born out of a marriage in which dowry was paid, therefore with the rights to stay in her father's village, was sent away with her

mother to Mkanda village something which made Kumalekano's action highly antisocial and therefore, unacceptable by the community.

By most accounts, after Timang'amba's death there was a drought and even Lake Malombe had a very low water level so much that people made their gardens on the lake bed. This seems to be the drought which took place in 1927. Abasi Tambala Lai recounted to me his personal experiences of the time and how Akumbirika was called to Bimbiship. His testimony has it that during the drought many people from Ulongwe area used to go to Chapola and Changali looking for food at distances of more than fifteen to twenty miles. Many peoples' lives were in great danger. It was under such circumstances that Akumbirika went to Chapola to work for food.

When she arrived there she was given some maize to pound in exchange for a small basket full of maize. After she finished pounding the maize, she took it back to the owner of the maize. But instead of thanking her for her services the owner began to shout at her angrily saying: 'You have not pounded this maize well. You should have pounded it finer than it looks. This is not good enough'. When Akumbirika heard this she broke down and began to cry in a loud voice:

"Kumtenda:asale	"I am told: speak!
Kumtenda:asale	I am told: speak."

Soon after this she kept on shouting this in a song form and began to go round and round the village. Then she started running homewards totally out of her mind and shouting as she went along. People ran after her but she ran faster than anyone else. When she reached Ulongwe area she went straight to Mkanda. Once at Mkanda village she began to sing milawe songs exactly as her father did before. She

refused to eat for three days. Then she was possessed again and ran into the bush and climbed the njale tree which is found today in Ligwangwa village. This is the tree which Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi climbed later in 1959 when he became Bimbi.

When people saw this, they reported the matter to Kutambala village headman who after satisfying himself with the course of events summoned a group of elders to join him in the process of making Akumbirika into Bimbi.¹⁰⁵ At the milawe ceremony which was conducted at night to examine her claim that she was Mtsamila, Akumbirika is said to have made the following prophecy. She prophesied saying:

"The lake (Malomba) will go up with water this year. People from Chapola's village will come here to look for food because their land will be flooded. There will be rain for two days and you will see the water coming from the south going to the north."¹⁰⁶

And then, summoning village headman Chapola, she addressed to him these words:

"This year you must stop growing crops on the lake bed because the lake will be flooded and your crops will be destroyed. You must move your house up to the higher ground."¹⁰⁷

People thought she was telling lies. Then after this was said, the rainy season came. One day it started raining at 5.00pm and continued raining for two days. Rivers flooded. Then water began to come in waves towards the north which was against the normal flow of the water on the lake which moves from north to south. The lake began to be filled up with water. At the end of two days the whole lake was filled up with water from the south. At Chapola's place all the gardens came under water. Many crops - maize,

pumpkins and bananas were destroyed. Chapola's people began to go to Ulongwe area for food after theirs had been destroyed by water. It was a sad situation but Akumbirika's prophecy became true. It was fulfilled. This is how her position as Bimbi was authenticated and she became known as Mtsamila II.¹⁰⁸

According to Nandumbo Kasira, Mtsamila II was an amazing prophetess. Whatever she predicted during her life time came true. If she predicted droughts, or floods these happened without fail. She used to wear black cloth from the beginning of the rainy season till after harvest. She wore black in order to induce rain. If she wore white she could render the sky cloudless. After the rainy season was over she could wear white cloth for there was no need for rain.¹⁰⁹ Mary Useni has it that during the rainy season Mtsamila always looked as possessed. She was not supposed to be rained upon or tramp rain water. At the beginning of the rain season, if she came to a stream she could not cross it by herself but she was carried on the shoulders of a man with her legs dangling on each side. It was feared that if she touched the first waters of the rain she could render the land dry without rain.¹¹⁰

When Akumbirika became Bimbi she went to reside in her father's village for a short time, but later she was forced to abandon the village because of the conflict that erupted between her and Kumalekano. The issue at stake was that Timang'amba's nephews complained that the Bimbiship was theirs and that it was not proper for a daughter to become Bimbi instead of the nephews.

The anger of Timang'amba's nephews was not without foundation. Succession as practised in the Bimbi cult contradicts the norms of succession as prescribed by the rules of succession in a matrilineal society such as that of the Chewa. By negating the system of succession on principles of matrilineage the

Bimbi system of succession is looked upon as an anomaly, therefore, disliked by all those excluded for natural succession. To the Bimbi cult itself, however, this is fundamentally significant because it emphasises the view that the call to Bimbiship is a divine act, therefore, out of control of human agents who might manipulate it for their own gains.

Traditions have it that Akumbirika left Mponda-wa-Bimbi village after Kumalekano sent a magic rat at night to Akumbirika's house and ate the upper lip of her daughter near the nose while she was asleep thus leaving some of her teeth bare.¹¹¹

Many of my informants claimed that they saw Mtsamila II. She must have been in power from about 1927 to 1957 when she died. She was slim and rather black in complexion and of average height. At one of the interviews I had with Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, he described Mtsamila II in these words:

"She had the same drinking habits as my grandfather. She was very conscious that she was a woman. So if someone addressed to her without much respect she could scream at him saying:

'Why do you do that to me? Is it because I am a woman? You won't do that again. You will see.'

People feared her greatly but she was loved by many. She used to move a lot socially. She cooked food for me and looked after me. I was living with her. She was a woman of strange ways."¹¹²

Mtsamila II was married first by her cousin called Majawa. He died soon afterwards. She was then married to a man called Sigala. Mtsamila's name as a rain-caller is said to have been heard everywhere in the Upper Shire Valley. She was friendly not only with Yao village headmen but also Ngoni village headmen some of whom she gave authority to own rain shrines. For instance, Chagunda oral traditions have it that it was Mtsamila II who gave Ngoni village

headman Chagunda II mphika-wa-mvula (a pot for making rain offerings).¹¹³ Mtsamila's fame as a rain-caller went as far as Matope in Blantyre area and people from there came to consult her for help. This was particularly so during the 1927-1928 drought. The scale and impact of that drought appears to have affected a large area for Fr. Petro Kilekwa writing about famine in Malindi-Lungwena area in Mangochi district has this documented:

"January and February were months of drought, the sun burning very hot so that the fields were looking poorly, many plants, the maize, millet etc., began to bend down. Our people could not manage it; so there were different kinds of prayers and offerings according to beliefs - heathen, Mohammedans and we Christians. Mohammedans and heathens made their prayers and offerings to the spirits of their old chiefs who had died."¹¹⁴

And the Revd. G.H. Wilson reported the following about Mponda's and Mkope also in Mangochi district:

"The maize crop, except at Chileka has failed lamentably all through to Mpondas and Mkope districts. During the later rains folks were desperately planting beans and such things in the hope of doing something to lessen the famine."¹¹⁵

It appears that many people from various districts flocked to Mtsamila for milawe. Fr. Geoffrey Harvey's report about the situation in Matope area is very revealing for he writes:

"The final remark of a certain Member of Parliament at a recent debate that the British workman was more interested in his rent book than in the Prayer Book finds a counterpart here these days we being rather more interested in rain than 'rithmetic. The crops

are in a bad way. Mrs. Bimbi, the rain maker, must be growing comparatively rich considering the amount of cash and cloth that is being poured into her lap as fees and offerings, but she still refrains from delivering the goods ...

The messengers of one village bearing offerings were told that on their return to their home the rain would fall for three days and nights with such force that people would not be able to leave their homes. This statement was qualified by another which suggested that if matters did not turn out as said, the village must whip around again and make her another offering as the original one was somewhat meagre for a village so large and a chief so important and of such noble character. However, the blue skies stubbornly refuse to turn black and the villagers have lost faith in Mrs. Bimbi and her pretty compliments to the chief have fallen on deaf ears."¹¹⁶

It is interesting to note that there are traditions which indicate that in 1928 Mtsamila was consulted by white planters from Mulanje. They came to Ferry Boma (Liwonde) and asked the District Commissioner to help them by asking Mtsamila to make rain for them. Mtsamila was summoned by the whites to the boma. The D.C. told her that he had heard that she was a rain caller and that he sent for her so that she could make rain for them. Mtsamila asked the D.C. to enclose her in a dark house. At nightfall she began to sing milawe. Dark clouds began to gather in the sky and suddenly it began to rain. It rained for two consecutive days and the white planters were satisfied and went home only to find that it rained there also. Mtsamila herself escaped to Ulongwe under the cover of the night.¹¹⁷

Mtsamila II is remembered for a number of wonderful deeds she performed during her life time. For example Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi has it that once when Bwana Pegala (a nickname given to one of the D.C.'s at the boma) was District Commissioner at

Liwonde he had some troubles with the reeds on the waters of the Shire River between Liwonde and Ulongwe. His boat was once trapped on piles of floating reeds. There were so many that the propeller of his engine was not able to move. He tried all sorts of methods to free the boat from the reeds but failed. He took some dynamite and used it to disperse the reeds but this too produced no good results.

When Mtsamila heard about this she sent word to chief Liwonde with the following message:

"Tell that White man not to trouble himself any more for he will not be successful in his attempts to release the boat from the reeds. I will send my own people to do the job for him."

The District Commissioner gave up. After a day a strong wind began to blow up. It came from the north. Gradually, the reeds began to drift away from the boat by the power of the current. They moved from the centre of the river on to the banks. After two days the boat was released and the whole water course was cleared of reeds and the D.C. was able to continue his journey back to the boma.¹¹⁸

It may be of interest to note that a more or less similar story affecting a different rain caller was recorded by Sir Harry Johnston as occurring in the northern part of Malawi in 1890's. According to him at the north end of Lake Malawi there was an old rain-caller named Mwaka Sungula much revered for his powers of bringing down rain or of changing the wind. He was often resorted to when the weather required amendment. Once the African Lakes Company's steamer Domira was stranded in the shallows a little distance to the north of Kalonga. Hundreds of people were employed for days tugging and hauling and pushing at the steamer without any success. She still remained hopelessly stuck in the sand.

At last they called Mwaka Sungula to their assistance. Having been given a small present he went through certain incantations in the evening of the day and wound up by sprinkling the blood of a white cock on the people around the steamer. Next morning the steamer was afloat. The wind had changed in the night, had blown up the water of the lake and raised the vessel from off the sand.¹¹⁹

There are also other stories which show Mtsamila's spiritual prowess as prophetess. For example traditions have it that one year during her lifetime there was an invasion of locusts - zombe - at Ulongwe area. This must have been sometime between 1930 and 1933. For according to Francisco Dickson Chagunda these years witnessed three devastating invasions of locusts. The first invasion was of locusts called chimbalinga. This type had plenty of hair on the chest and it was very destructive to the maize crop. This type of locust used to invade trees first and then would come down upon the maize crop. The elders used to get up early in the morning to catch the locusts and put them in bags for they were also good for relish.

After this wave of locusts went, another invasion of locusts came. It was called mandowa. These were hairless on the chest. This type used to invade maize gardens and lay eggs on the ground. People used to eat this type of locust also. They used to pick out the locusts on the ground and also dig out the eggs from underground. People ate both the locusts themselves and the eggs.

When this invasion came to an end, another wave of locusts came which used to invade mainly trees and grass in the forest. This type was not as destructive as chimbalinga and mandowa locusts. These invasions followed one after another for three consecutive years.¹²⁰

It appears that the second invasion of locusts

occured in the 1931-1932 agricultural season. In that year eggs of locusts which had been buried in the ground hatched. People planted their crops and the maize grew. When it was a few feet high the locusts came, fell upon the maize and destroyed whole gardens. People went to the boma to seek help. The District Commissioner came from Liwonde. He was frightened to see the way in which the locusts were destroying the crops. He summoned all the village headmen at Ulongwe. He told them to dig trenches almost everywhere in the gardens and told them to collect as many locusts as possible and throw them in the trenches. Once the locusts were thrown in the trenches the D.C. ordered the people to cover the trenches with much soil to kill the locusts. They did this in several places but without much success. The D.C. was tired. He built his tent in ku-Tambala's village. He stayed there for several days. At the end he summoned ku-Tambala village headman and said to him: 'look I am tired, I cannot kill these locusts despite my efforts. What shall we do?'

Masiwire ku-Tambala told him that there was a woman called Mtsamila who could be able to help. Ku-Tambala went to see Mtsamila and a milawe ceremony was held. At that ceremony Mtsamila told ku-Tambala to have his heart at rest for she was going to send her asilikali (soldiers) the following day at 7.00am to destroy the locusts. She told him not to mock them (wosachita chipongwe). Ku-Tambala told the D.C. what Mtsamila had said and he kept wondering what type of soldiers these would be.

The following day at 7.00am the D.C. and the people around him saw very many birds coming. They came down on to the gardens and began to eat the locusts. Some of the birds were huge black and white. After three days the locusts were all eaten up and the maize was saved. The D.C. was astonished. He gave orders that from that time onwards no one should

kill birds otherwise he would send them to jail.¹²¹

Traditions also abound that Mtsamila had predicted in 1948 that there would be severe drought and famine the following year. My informants told me that Mtsamila warned people in the Ulongwe area to take care of their food consignments because the famine would be so severe that though the government would help it would be of much less effect. Many of the Yao chiefs refused to take her word seriously and ridiculed her that she was telling lies. Mtsamila on her part told them that if they continued to be stubborn and not give respect to what God was saying through the ancestral spirits they would suffer greatly.

In that year things happened exactly the way Mtsamila had predicted. The rain came quite late in November, then it stopped. It did not rain in December and January. It rained ver little in Februrary and by then many crops had been destroyed. People had very little maize in the country. In the Upper Shire region famine followed. People lived on wild fruits. Sometimes they ate the inside of the stem of the banana trees which they pounded into flour and cooked nsima (thick porridge) out of it. People spent long hours at Lake Malombe and Shire River hoping to catch some fish which had also become scarce. Many people died. It is reckoned that in Ku-Tambala village alone four people died namely Mdala, Disi, Bwanali and Kwemba.¹²² The famine situation was such that for the first time in the history of Nyasaland (Malawi) large sections of the population were obliged to depend on the bulk importation of foodstuffs, a task made doubly difficult by the transport situation prevailing at the time. It is reckoned that at the end of 1949, 14,000 tons of maize and 1,500 tons of other African foods had been imported from Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Kenya, Tanganyika (Tanzania) and the United States of America.¹²³

Mtsamila died sometime at the beginning of

1957.¹²⁴ As in the manner of the Bimbis she was possessed and gradually became weak and died. Her body was moved from Mkanda village on the eastern side of Nkasi river to ku-Tambala village five miles west of the river where she was buried. Village headman Mkanda explained to me that they took the body to ku-Tambala village in order to send away the spirit of Bimbiship which did not belong to their lineage but that of the ku-Tambala's.¹²⁵ This was said possibly on the assumption that since village headman ku-Tambala is involved in the examination of those who become Bimbis then it can be concluded that they have a controlling power on authenticating the candidate, therefore, in close relationship with the spirit of Bimbiship.

Before Mtsamila died she predicted that her successor would be a male Bimbi but she never mentioned the candidate by name. Three years elapsed before Swaleyi Mkwanda was possessed and succeeded her.

CHAPTER 8

THE BIMBI CULT AND ITS INTERACTION WITH ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

a The Bimbi cult and Islam

The relationship between the Bimbi cult and Islam is an interesting one since the present incumbent Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, is a muslim himself. Although he is the leader of the Bimbi cult it seems that he observes some of the five pillars of Islam such as the Shahadah, Ramadhan, daily prayers and Friday prayers at the mosque, and gives alms to the poor. Besides, he accords Islam a place of honour within the cult.

The presence of Islam in Malawi is traced back to the 1840's when Arab traders set up muslim communities in central and northern parts of Malawi. With the arrival of the Yao in Southern Malawi in the second half of the 19th century, Islam grew rapidly and has become a formidable religious power in the region. Islam was further strengthened by the presence of independent itinerant preachers notable among whom was Sheikh Thabiti bin Ngaunje who, according to my informants, was the first muslim leader to come face to face with leaders of the Bimbi cult.

Up to the beginning of the 1980's the relationship between the Bimbi cult and Islam was, in every respect, a cordial one. Bimbi cult's beliefs and Islamic beliefs were freely mixed together without any confrontation of allegiances on either part.

Scholars on Islam have indicated that this mixing of African beliefs and practices with Islamic elements is found in the nature of Islam itself. I.M. Lewis, for one, has it that

"In the ... islamization of traditional belief the most important aspect of Muslim religious phenomenology which has greatly facilitated its initial impact and appeal ... is its truly catholic recognition of the multiplicity of mystical power ... as long as God's lofty pre-eminence is not compromised, the Quran itself provides scriptural warrant for the existence of a host of subsidiary powers and spirits."¹

According to Lewis there is in the Quran a voluminous store-house of angels, jinns, and devils and there are passages which justify their existence as a real phenomenon. In these many traditional powers find a hospitable home. Consequently, for as long as traditional beliefs can be adjusted in such a way that they fall into place within a Muslim schema in which the Absoluteness of Allah remains unquestioned, Islam does not ask its new converts to abandon their accustomed confidence in all their mystical forces.² G.E. von Grunebaum has pointed out that by gradually drifting away from its canon law Islam facilitated the integration into the Islamic community of alien communities by allowing them to carry over into the new faith much of their traditional way of life. Thus Islam provided a religious framework which was the more readily acceptable because by and large it did not insist on full compliance to the absolute principles of Islam.³ Corollary to this

"the life of integrated Islamic communities is a mosaic of Islamic and indigenous elements in complex combinations ... although there are some changes in the basic structure of the traditional way of life, the old bases of community remain paramount."⁴

Some authorities have also reiterated that by adjusting itself to the local conditions Islam presented itself

as a native religion and not as a colonial importation, for the difference in the standard of living so obvious in the case of christians newly arrived from Europe did not arise between muslims and the local people who sprang from the same soil.⁵

The Bimbi cult and Islam: Past and present

We know from U.M.C.A. records that Islam found its way into the Bimbi village sometime in 1910. Five years earlier the U.M.C.A. had established their school there only to be disturbed by the incursion of Islam into the area.⁶ Oral traditions preserved by Kudawe Chiwere maintain that the first Shaikh to come in contact with one of the Bimbis was Shaikh Thabiti Ngaunje. That was during the time of Timang'amba Bimbi. According to Kudawe Chiwere there was no conflict between Timang'amba Bimbi and Shaikh Thabiti Ngaunje (1880-1959).⁷

My informants explained to me that Thabiti Ngaunje's unwillingness to oppose the Bimbi cult as a religious system was based on the fact that he found it already well established and it did not offer an obstacle to the advancement of Islam at all. He, therefore, refrained from interfering with it. The Bimbi, on his part, never desired to do Islam any harm. He kept himself to himself because he realised that his role was different from the role of the muslim clerics who helped people to prepare themselves for their future life in heaven. Bimbi saw himself more in terms of a rain-caller to help people with their needs here and now. When the waalimu came Bimbi, therefore, gave them a free hand to teach people about Islam.⁸

Bimbi Timanga's positive response to Islam is seen in that he allowed some of his children to embrace Islam. Among them was his first born son Mkwanda, the father of the present Bimbi. Mkwanda's

involvement in Islam seems to have been far reaching for later he himself began to teach his children elements of Islam and converted them to the new faith. This is how the present Bimbi became a muslim.]

Despite his favourable response, Timang'amba Bimbi was never converted to Islam. He remained a traditionalist to the time of his death. Islam, however, became the main religion in the Bimbi village. A mosque was built not in the Bimbi village proper but in Maninji village three miles away from the Bimbi village. That became the centre of Islamic teaching for almost the whole of the Ulongwe area.⁹

At this early stage of Islamic development we have no accounts of conflict whatever between the cult and Islam. Whenever Bimbi was possessed, muslims and traditionalists came to hear what Bimbi said about the climatic conditions of their area and participated together in the rituals prescribed by Bimbi. At this point in time Islam did not interfere in Chewa religious beliefs and practices especially in regard with rituals which affected territorial economic interests of the people at large. We have, for instance, missionary accounts which indicate that whenever there was a drought crisis in the Ulongwe area, the seat of the cult, muslims and "heathen" always thought that such calamities were caused because of a break in relationships with their dead relations and that in order to correct the situation they used to make offerings together in a form of sweet beer.

This cordial relationship between the Bimbi cult and Islam may be explained in terms of Lewis's hypothesis that nature-spirits and powers associated with the fertility of particular localities (and this may include some ancestral spirits), though treated with less consideration by orthodox muslims, are sometimes integrated indirectly in a manner which both emphasises the superior power of Islam and

maintains religious continuity.¹⁰

It appears to me that the impotence of Islam to supplant the Bimbi cult as a religious institution, whose leader is a muslim himself, lies in the social economy of the Chewa people and the cultural attitude of Islam towards agriculture. It has been pointed out that the Chewa are primarily an agricultural people whose livelihood depends on the productivity of the land and their relationship to it which is surrounded by religious taboos. This is at variance with Islam which, by most accounts, has had little emphasis upon agriculture but trade as the saying goes "the trader is a muslim and the cultivator is a pagan ... the muslim trader in his cultivation is a pagan, just as the pagan trader is a muslim."¹¹ Lewis has described the favourable position of trade in Islam in these words:

"... despite the Islamic prescriptions on usury (which in any case are not difficult to circumvent), the Muslim ethic as a whole is markedly favourable to trade, commerce and industry. These indeed are all regarded as eminently respectable activities, and their practice in Africa has been favoured by the supra-tribal ethos of Islam, its common procedures and values, and the use of Arabic as a means of commercial communication and account-keeping."¹²

The indifference of Islam towards the religious nature of agriculture is said to be emphasised by its calendar. Trimingham, for instance, has indicated that one of the important features of the process of Islamisation has been the adoption of the muslim calendar which follows a year of twelve lunar months which is out of touch with the agricultural calendar based on the solar year which is followed by many African peoples.¹³ The Islamic calendar is said to be in conformity with commercial and trading

activities leaving out almost all agricultural ritual activities of an agricultural society which is the case among the Chewa of the Upper Shire Valley.

It appears plausible to argue that since Islam was introduced by way of trade and for as long as it continues to have less and less emphasis on agricultural rituals, it will still force its rural-based agricultural societies in the Upper Shire region to revert to the Bimbi cult for the agricultural rituals it provides and which fit the natural cycle of seed time and harvest. Presently this seems to be the case for though many of the cult leaders and the commoners are muslims, they, nevertheless, look upon the Bimbi cult as the most effective means of communication with Chauta in times of ecological and natural crisis.

The prevailing situation in the Upper Shire in the interaction between Islam and the Bimbi cult is expressive of J.S. Trimingham's view that among cultivators, who comprise the majority of African muslims, relationship with traditional culture remains vigorous. Trimingham has it that in such agricultural societies beliefs and rituals concerning spirits remain a stronghold of traditional consciousness and that in the early stages of conversion offerings to ancestors as intercessors and intermediaries in the chain of supplication reaching to God may continue.¹⁴ Up to more recent years this mixing up of African religious beliefs and practices with Islamic rituals has been a peaceful one the main support coming from the Qadiriya community. But more recently there appears to be an all out confrontation between the leaders of the cult and leaders of the Sukuti (Shadiliya) brotherhood. Islam in the Upper Shire Valley appears to have entered into an age of reform the results of which remain to be seen. The driving force of this reform movement is the emergence of a well trained group of Shaikhs and waalimu, some of whom

have had special training abroad. Many of these Shaikhs are members of the Sukuti brotherhood and they seem to have a strong say in what is called "Muslim Association in Malawi" a kind of organisation which is trying to wield all the muslims together into a more vital body. One of the aims of this association seems to be to purge Islam of its traditional elements by disseminating literacy and literature. This is done by establishing a number of well developed and equipped koranic schools with well trained teachers. Centres of higher formal education are also being built almost on a competitive basis with missionary schools which have hitherto enjoyed great government patronage. In order to have a lasting physical impact on the population more elegant mosques are being built almost everywhere in the Upper Shire much to the discomfort of the Christian churches.

In order to tackle the Bimbi question, the leaders of Sukuti have based their argument on the theological implications of shirk. According to Sukuti leaders, consulting Bimbi on matters of rain and making offerings for rain to God through the ancestral spirits is shirk. Shirk has been defined as the cardinal sin of idolatry in Islam and constitutes the attribution of divine power, knowledge or will to other than God.¹⁵ It is the allowance of other gods: beside God, the idolatry which denies to God alone the worship, trust, honour and gratitude due to him. Shirk is also said to be sin against man. The idolater is his own enemy in that he corrupts and distorts his own being in the untruth of his gods.¹⁶ Muhammed is reported to have said that shirk was a sin for which God has no forgiveness.¹⁷

But this is a matter of great debate and conflict between the leaders of the Qadiriya brotherhood supported by the majority of the people on the one hand and the leaders of the Sukuti movement on the other. The leaders of the Qadiriya brotherhood

claim that consulting Bimbi, though not supported by the Quran, does not constitute shirk. It is just a matter of recognising the division of labour in society for while God gave Islam the duty of preparing people for their future life in heaven God called Bimbi to help people get their basic needs in terms of food here on earth. Surely, so they argue, this must be in line with God's will who wants his people to have life here on earth'. The argument between followers of Qadiriya and Sukuti in terms of the orthodoxy of their views is still inconclusive and the outcome remains to be seen.

Peter Lienhardt has indicated that in Islamic communities where the level of literacy and literature is low and where Arabic is not the daily language of the community one may expect to find more people doubtful of the ways in which their own popular Islam differs from the prescription of the Sharia, thus giving rise to differences of opinion within one and the same community.¹⁸

It may be of interest to point out that Sukuti leaders' attacks on the Bimbi cult are not purely religious. There are indications that Kalembo, the paramount chief, is using Sukuti militancy as a means of asserting a certain autonomy from the spiritual sway of Bimbi on land rituals. The Sukuti leaders, on their side, see chief Kalembo as a stepping stone to consolidate their claims of superior spirituality over that of the followers of the Qadiriya movement.

One of the best examples of the contest between Islam of the Sukuti brotherhood and the Bimbi cult is said to have taken place in December, 1980. According to James John Chisanje, that year the rain did not come for the great part of November and December. When this happened people, according to custom, began to urge chief Kalembo to send his headmen to consult Bimbi.¹⁹

Shaikh Yusufu Maidah, who took part in the

controversy that followed, recounted his experiences to me in these words:

"Chief Kalembo summoned all the Shaikhs and asked them what he should do. Shaikh Useni Twaibu Mwalabu, the leader of the Sukuti brotherhood in the area and Chairman of the Muslim Association in Malawi, told chief Kalembo saying:

'Look, do not go to consult Bimbi after all he is a mere human being. We will pray for rain ourselves and it will come'.

He told the assembled Shaikhs that the crisis could only be solved by prayer and fasting. We all gathered at the mosque at Kalembo. Shaikh Mwalabu commanded us to fast for three consecutive days in the mosque. There were almost all the Shaikhs in Kalembo chiefdom, more than twenty of us.

A large number of muslims were also there but they did not go into the mosque and they did not fast as we did. On the fourth day we prayed for the whole day. Fortunately for us the rain came the same day. We all believed that God answered our prayer. Some people, however, did not believe us and said that the rain came because Bimbi had predicted that the rain would come that day anyway. We just left things as they were."20

According to James John Chisanje the contest took place on 25th December. Prayers began at 8.00am in the mosque and then small rain began to fall slowly on the same day for about half an hour. When the Shaikhs saw this they stopped praying and went to their respective villages hoping that after this initial instalment proper rains would come as asked by the people. But after that date there was intense heat and the sky remained stubbornly crystal clear. People in the Ulongwe area realised that their chief had let them down and that there was an urgent need to go and consult Bimbi and plead with him to pray for rains. Some of the village headmen went secretly to Bimbi to ask him to intervene in the crisis. When

they arrived, there Bimbi said to them:

"Look I cannot help. Your muslim leaders said that I am not Bimbi and that my ancestral spirits cannot pray for rain on your behalf. You said rain cannot be controlled by a mere human being. Go to your muslim leaders. It is they who control the rain. Leave me alone."

People went to see chief Kalembo again to ask him to plead with Bimbi to pray for rain for the land was going to be on fire. Chief Kalembo instructed Group village headman Mpango wadi Msilo to go and kukapepetsa kwa a Bimbi (say sorry to Bimbi) saying: sitidzayambiranso (we will not do this again). After this Bimbi forgave the people. Milawe was held and Bimbi told people to make offerings to God through their ancestors whom they had neglected and despised. When people did as told the rain came on the day people made their offerings and the maize recovered in the gardens. Bimbi told people that they should not continue despising him because he did not choose himself to be Bimbi but it was God who chose him to be a rain specialist.²¹

Another contest between Bimbi and Islam is said to have taken place in 1982 though on a small scale. Kudawe Chiwere recounted to me that that year chief Kalembo, Shaikh Janati Yasini and a small number of Sukuti Shaikhs took some goats and foodstuffs with them and retired to a place called Kwale (quarry) near Mawere-a-Nyangu mountains, five miles south-west of Kalembo township. They stayed there for nine days praying for rain and eating. Their motive was to disqualify Bimbi if their attempts to make rain fall were crowned with success. Rain, however, did not come and the chief and his Shaikhs retired to Kalembo village with great disappointment. This forced chief Kalembo to instruct Mpango wadi

Msilo to go and consult Bimbi.²²

Mwalimu Idilisa Masungu has it that the conflict which has evolved between Bimbi and the Sukuti Muslim leaders is because Islam wants to test its own strength over that of the Bimbi cult when it comes to matters of rain. Muslim leaders want to show that it is only Allah who has the sole power over rain.²³

Attempts by muslim clerics to take over the ritual powers of rain calling are said to have some traditional support. Islam is said to have a ritual rain ceremony which is in vogue among cultivators.²⁴ Rain-calling seems to have had some fascination among muslim for there are examples where some Sudanese chiefs are said to have been converted to Islam through experiencing the rain-making powers of a muslim visitor.²⁵

It is important to point out that the response of Bimbi officials to the militancy tendencies of Sukuti leaders is rather cool and cautious. At the moment the Bimbi cult continues to draw a great deal of support from many people from the muslim communities regardless of their affiliation to particular brotherhoods. The controversies which have developed between Qadiriya and Sukuti over the question of orthodoxy on issues such as jando, sadaka, maliro (funerals) and the role of ancestral spirits in prayers for rain, means that there is no concerted action on the part of the muslims to discard from the Islamic faith all those elements which they feel they are at variance with orthodox Islam. But above all the fact that Islam is dealing with an agricultural society with indestructible kinship ties and not a trading society will make the task of purging Islam of its locally adopted beliefs and rituals for rain-calling even more difficult unless a jihad, by a group of fundamentalists occurs.

b The Bimbi cult and the Christian church

The nature of the interaction between the Bimbi cult and Christianity must be sought in the nature of the missionaries' understanding of Christianity itself. From the outset of the inception of Christianity in the Upper Shire Valley, the policy of the Church in relation to Chewa religious beliefs and practices was to eradicate what to the missionaries appeared as "false consciousness" of the Supreme Being. The primary objective of the Church, it appears to me, was to teach the African peoples the great truths about God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ in his Church. To this effect, as circumstances gave them the chance, the first missionaries seized every opportunity to teach their converts that much of their religious beliefs, if not all of them, were not only false but were also sin against God and man and that they should be abandoned altogether. The missionaries were determined to implant a pure Christian faith which was free from pagan elements. There was no room for compromise or give and take situation. It is within this context that the relationship between the Bimbi cult and Christianity must be understood.

Although many churches operate in the Upper Shire Valley today, it was generally agreed by my informants that the first church to make its appearance in the area was the Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA). Since there is no room here to discuss the policies of all the churches active in the region today, I propose that for the sake of this analysis we follow the activities of the UMCA because its policies can be said to be representative of the other main churches in the area.

Revd. Laurence Chisui credits W.P. Johnson as instrumental in spreading Christianity in much of the Upper Shire Valley. Thanks to the mission

steamship Charles Janson, Johnson toured many of the villages along the Shire River as far down as Matope, preaching the Gospel and converting many people to Christianity.²⁶ With great missionary zeal, stations were established along the lake shore on the southern end of Lake Malawi. According to Bishop Donald Arden the primary objective of the UMCA mission to the Upper Shire region was to grapple with Islam which had established a foothold there as well as to convert pagans to Christianity.²⁷

One of the early stations in the Mangochi area was set up at Mpondas where Islam is said to have been very vigorous and more militant than anywhere else. The mission was opened in 1896. By 1902, as a result of hard work a community of christians was formed at Mponda's. From Mponda's the first missionaries went on missionary ventures into the interior establishing schools and mission stations as well as medical work.²⁸ Another missionary stronghold was established at Malindi on the south-east shore of Lake Malawi. Prior to the time of setting up the mission station there, Malindi had been the workshop for fitting and refitting the steamers which floated on the lake as mission stations on their own right. From Malindi the missionaries succeeded in opening up mission stations along the way to Unangu.²⁹ Besides, yet another station was opened at Mkope Hill on the south-western side of Lake Malawi in 1921.³⁰ Work which was carried out there resulted in the formation of a strong christian community at Mkope and soon other smaller christian communities were formed in the surrounding villages. Further south of the Shire River mission work started at Likwenu where a mission station was set up in 1918 to carry out church work in much of Zomba and Machinga districts along the shire River.³¹

Oral traditions preserved by Kudawe Chiwere maintain that Christianity began to have a stronghold

in the Upper Shire region during the time of Archdeacon Eyre. The UMCA was known as Chalichi cha Likoma (The Church of Likoma Island). Eyre is credited to have been a man of the people and the success of his work was attributed to the fact that he was well versed in Islam and sympathetic to the local customs. This made people feel that he was one of them and in this way he attracted many converts both muslims and "pagans".³²

We know from UMCA accounts and oral traditions that Christianity was implanted in the Bimbi village sometime in 1905.³³ According to Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi the station was established there during the time of Timang'amba Bimbi. According to him there are no traditions in the Bimbi cult which indicate the presence of any open conflict between the missionaries and Timang'amba Bimbi. Bimbi is said to have welcomed them. He let his people choose which faith they wanted to follow particularly so when Islam came into the village five years later. He himself, however, was converted neither to Christianity nor to Islam.

The growth of the christian community in the Bimbi village seems to have been rather slow and painstaking for even as late as 1921 Revd. A.C. Churward reported that there were in the village only six christian men and five catechumens some of whom kept on relapsing.³⁴ This apparent lack of success was due to the opposition of the elders of the village and the great influence which Bimbi enjoyed in the area.³⁵

Fr. Jenkins writing in 1921 noted:

"Mtembwe, on the right or western bank of the Shire ... an old teacher has made great strides and the village has turned round from indifference to keenness, though it is a struggle between Christ and the false prophet."³⁶

Although we do not have specific examples of clashes between the Bimbi cult and the UMCA there are strong indications, however, that the church opposed strongly the practices inherent in the cult. According to Grace Mary Useni, a matrilineal member of the Kasenjera lineage which is closely related to the Bimbi cult, when the first missionaries came they forced their converts to give up their old customs completely. Anglican christians were forbidden to take part in the prayers and offerings for rain or thanksgiving prayers after harvest. They were told that these could only be done in the Church under the guidance of a teacher or a priest. Many people began to be scared of the new propositions and the opposition of the elders prevented converts from receiving the Cross as soon as they embraced the new faith.³⁷

The position of the church in these matters can only be understood when we consider that the overall policy of the Church was to achieve a genuine and thorough conversion of the people among whom the gosple was preached. The Church insisted on a real conversion which required the converts to have a complete and immediate break with their past by casting off the works of darkness as inherent in the religious beliefs and practices of their elders. The Church was prepared to do this at any cost for it was looking for quality and not quantity.

In order to ensure that quality was achieved, Christian teaching for the new converts was thorough and prolonged in most cases lasting for as long as three years before they could be baptised. The road to baptism was made tough. Converts had to go through a number of lengthy stages beginning with Wovecha (Hearers), Wanafunsi (those who had received the Cross), aUbatizo (those preparing for Baptism) and aKanfololia (those preparing for the Holy Communion). These stages, sometimes, worked as mechanisms to sift "wheat" from "tares". This is reflected in

G.H. Wilson's view on baptism during his work at Mpondas. He observed:

"Every year I spend in Africa I become more convinced that it is not really kindness to make the path to baptism too easy. The number of catechumens is simply amazing, eighty all told. Of course it is easy to make too much of numbers and no doubt perhaps many will fall out."³⁸

Much of this falling out consisted of participating in traditional customs proscribed by the Church such as drinking, traditional dances, polygamy, initiation ceremonies for boys and girls, the use of amulets and offerings for rains through the ancestral spirits. Christianity, was faced with the great task of creating a new world outlook which demanded an interior change of heart and total response to the gospel a demand which was sometimes so radical and so brisk that it was at variance with the way in which people had arranged their lives hitherto.

One of the most persisting issues which has ever stood in the way to Christian progress has been the veneration of the ancestral spirits as manifested in the prayers and offerings directed to God through them. Ancestor veneration especially in their role as intercessors in the chain of intermediaries, has always been in the eyes of the missionaries and preachers as undermining the basic foundation of the Christian church itself. In a sense it appears to deny the absolute truth that in Christ we have the sole Mediator and High Priest who made an offering of himself once and for all mankind. Ancestor veneration is seen not only as idolatrous in its crudest sense, but also as a negation of the salvific power of Christ effected by his life, death and resurrection thus disclosing God's love to mankind.

It will thus be seen that agricultural rites of the kind practised in the Bimbi cult which

involve the invocation of the ancestral spirits, have no room in the Christian schema of salvation. It seems that the implication of the Christian teaching is the idea that the ancestral spirits in their state as dead ancestors are dead and gone, therefore, they have no power over their descendants either as intercessors or guardians of the people. As such they must not be invoked in the prayers directed to God since this is tantamount to denying the efficacy of the mediatory role of Christ, the saints and the sacraments of the Church of which Christ himself is the greatest sacrament.

In order to grapple with the question of ancestor veneration, the UMCA strongly urged their Christian members that when remembering their dead they should ask the Christian mwali to have a service in Church using litany or other prayers for the departed or request for a requiem mass during which the names of the departed Christians were prayed for and not prayed through the implications of which being that they assumed even a more lowly status than accorded to them in the traditional society.

As regards the more pressing question for prayers for rains, the UMCA adopted a twofold policy. One arm of this consisted of putting under discipline those who broke the church law by participating in such rituals, and the other was for the church to have special prayers in church for rain. Examples of the first policy can be seen from the way in which the Church at Malindi dealt with such people during the 1928 famine which struck much of the Upper Shire region. Father Petro Kilekwa reporting about the events of that year noted:

"Mohammedans and heathens made their prayers and offerings to the spirits of their old ancestors who had died and made native beer. There was great

rejoicing and dancing so that many of our Christians went to join them to drink the beer and dance. There were about 18 Christians who did this, so I put them under discipline. to sit among the catechumens."³⁹

A much more serious case happened in 1954 in the northern part of the then Diocese of Nyasaland on the eastern shores of Lake Malawi at Msumba. According to Bishop Stanley Pickard, in December of that year immediately before Christmas a vast crowd of christians both at Msumba and at Chiwanga had indulged in "spirit worship" and offerings to the departed ancestors. Owing to the lack of rain and fish in the lake, Chewa chiefs decided to call the people together in order to make offerings to the spirits and beg them for rain and fish. An enormous crowd of christians attended the ceremonies. Action had to be taken at once. The chiefs concerned, their village headmen and some Church Elders were put under Church discipline. All other christians were given the opportunity of confessing their guilt publicly and a solemn warning was given to them.⁴⁰

Concurrent with this policy, sometimes, the Church participated more positively in a Christian form of rain-calling themselves. During the already quoted drought situation of 1928 at Malindi after the "pagans" and muslims made their own prayers for rain, Father Kilekwa noted:

"We Christians had our share of praying to our heavenly Father to have mercy upon us by sending rain to feed all the fields, that we all in this district might have good crops and a good harvest in time. Thank God, we were answered the same day and after that we were getting rain for weeks."⁴¹

It is also reported that during the 1907 drought which affected a great part of the Upper Shire

area and caused a scare among the people because of a dreaded famine, they resorted to rain making ceremonies but with no effect. The situation was such that "the Rev. A.G. De la Pryme, ordering all heathen dances to cease, offered prayer in all the villages and in every case, within forty eight hours, He whose gift it is that the rain doth fall' sent it."⁴² One wonders what impact this Christian success in rain-calling had in the lives of ordinary christians. There are indications elsewhere that the success of prayers for rain determined the conversion of a whole group of people to Christianity. According to B. Pachai, what ultimately and decisively moved the Ngoni under Mbelwa to embrace Christianity and accept protectorate status was not the existence and influence of local or external forces which led to the debilitation of the Ngoni but drought. Mbelwa's lands had experienced recurrent drought conditions since 1882, the situation becoming worse in 1886. Local magicians having failed to cause the rain fall, Dr. Elmslie of the Livingstonia Mission was called upon to pray for rain. Elmslie seized the chance and at an ordinary Sunday prayer meeting he prayed for rain and the following day storm clouds broke over the parched lands. With that single event a new era dawned both in the history of the Ngoni and the Livingstonia Mission in Ngoni country. The chief allowed the mission to set up mission stations and schools in his lands.⁴³

It may be of interest to note that opposition to agricultural rituals as prescribed in the Bimbi cult comes from all the churches. The opposition is such that participation by the people in the rituals organised by cult leaders is lesser than before the introduction of Christianity. As far as christians are concerned, their participation is limited for fear that if they did they would be excommunicated from their churches or disciplined in one form or

another. More recently open opposition against the leaders of the cult has come from the Catholic Church at Ulongwe. The situation which may be embarrassing to the Church involves village headman Petro Mmaniwa who is himself a Catholic with a predominantly catholic population. Mmaniwa is the guardian of the Nyangu shrine in the Ulongwe Forest.

The Catholic Fathers forbid their christians to participate in rain calling ceremonies because this is kupembeza mafano (idolatry). The Church's opposition to Mmaniwa's ritual role and which has caused some controversy, reached its climax in 1983. In that year chief Kalembo authorised some men to cut wood in the Ulongwe forest which is considered sacred. Bimbi was angry. Merina James, Petro Mmaniwa's mother, recounted to me the events which followed the desecration of the forest in these words:

"Bimbi declared it profane and said that the spirits had run away to Mbwazulu Island. Bimbi instructed Mmaniwa that no offerings should be made in the forest until it was consecrated again. He told Mmaniwa to move the shrine temporarily to this village here. Mmaniwa asked village headman Mwalero to build the shrine in the village. When the Catholic fathers saw this they took offence. They summoned Mmaniwa and myself before akulu-akulu a mpingo (Church Elders) to be tried by them. The Catholic Fathers demanded that the shrine be destroyed since it was the work of the devil.

Mmaniwa refused to do so saying that he was upholding the traditions of his fathers and that he could not give up. Because of this we were both put under discipline. We were refused the Holy Communion but now we are allowed to communicate."

It is interesting to note that despite the Church's opposition to agricultural rituals performed in the Bimbi cult because of their nature as "pagan"

practices, these have stubbornly survived all the same. This is because a number of christians in the Upper Shire Valley have continued to be concerned with the fertility of the land and a good supply of rain for their crops more than anything else. The Church's injunction forbidding people from applying non-christian solutions to drought has fallen on deaf ears and the tendency has been that when crisis escalates people consult Bimbi for help especially when christian solutions fail.

Bimbi himself is not hostile either to Christianity or Islam. As a matter of fact he has very high regard of these two world religions and encourages all those who come to consult him to worship faithfully in their respective churches. The Bimbi cult does not claim either superiority or equality to Christianity or Islam. Bimbi considers these as God-given and with a high degree of righteousness and saving power in their own right. In Bimbi's view, the Bimbi cult is not and has never been a substitute for these two world religions. The Bimbi cult is only a cult specialised in rain calling and it is salvific in so far as people become aware of God's gift of himself to the world in the form of rain as a symbol of his goodness and benevolence.

It appears to me that christians in the Upper Shire Valley will continue to consult Bimbi and participate in the rituals prescribed by him on two main accounts. First and foremost in so far as they continue to depend on a subsistence agricultural economy their concern on how to secure the basic needs of human existence especially food will also continue. Old ways of food production which have even been surrounded by religious rituals will still appear to the people as the best solution of affecting the productivity of the land. So far a departure from this centuries old experience has seemed to many as a threat to their very survival. This being the case

it is little wonder that many christians lead ambivalent lives: one in Christ in times of peace and another in the security of the ancestral spirits in times of crisis.

Secondly, it appears to many that God, as presented by the missionaries, is too high to be concerned with the simple basic concerns of the people such as agriculture. To them he is an indifferent God a God different from the God of their fathers whom they have knoww as Mphambe (lightning and thunder) Leza (Sustainer), and Chauta (Big Bow) epithets which denote God's concern with the people's human existence in their agricultural pursuits. Bishop P.A. Kalilombe has indicated, that in the process of separating the Church from the state and religion from socio-economic and political tasks, there has been a tendency in the Church to exclude the challenge of God's word from what are called "wordly affairs" with the consequence that the Church has tended to withdraw from those areas of the people's lives such as economic pursuits, and the structure and process of human living in this life, which in day to day activities are the principal preoccupations.⁴⁵ And yet economics and ecology are concerns of Christian mission because they have to do with God's creation and human responsibility. It appears plausible to argue that the Church must not be concerned with just one aspect or department of human life but with the whole of it. It must be concerned not only with how men pray or lead their spiritual lives but also how they make their living in this world which is God-given and as valuable as the world to come. For it appears true to say that Christ came to save the whole of the human nature and human life and not only those sections of human life and human activities which are considered by nature religious.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, this study of the Bimbi cult, apart from filling one of the gaps of our knowledge of the belief systems of the Chewa in southern Malawi, has endeavoured to understand this religious institution as a united system of beliefs and practices in its wider historical, political and socio-economic context today. Unlike the previous studies carried out among the Chewa whose approach and content were more historical and theoretical, the present study has focused its attention, primarily, on the specific religious content of Chewa religion as found within the Bimbi religious system.

This thesis has, among other things, examined a fundamental question as to what extent if at all are religious concepts of the supernatural namely the Supreme Being, the ancestral spirits, good and evil, reward and punishment, largely determined by the prevailing ecosystems. The driving spirit in the argument has been that the Chewa, who have inhabited the Upper Shire Valley from at least as early as the first half of the 17th century, are, primarily, an agricultural society. Agriculture has always been the backbone of their economy. The Chewa are known to be a hard working people.¹ But the great obstacle in the agricultural prosperity of the Chewa in the Upper Shire Valley has always been the uncertainties of the rain. Recurrent drought conditions on a small and large scale are recorded by both missionaries and government officials. By most accounts the emergence of the Bimbi cult is said to have been a response to these recurrent and persistent dry climatic conditions. As a result the Bimbi territorial rain-shrine system evolved and is historically traced back to Kaphirintiwa in Central Malawi. We have seen that

Matthew Schoffeleers has recorded that at Kaphirintiwa a Proto-Chewa rain-shrine had assumed a central position in the earlier period of Chewa history and its authority seems to have been felt at all the shrines within central Malawi region. On the basis of overwhelming oral evidence the present study has concluded that a similar situation developed in the Upper Shire in the later period of Chewa state formation. A religious centre to counteract drought conditions emerged at Ulongwe under Bimbi to whom people from near and far distant places came to ask for help in times of crisis.

The dominant theology governing the religious activities of the Bimbi cult has been based first and foremost on the belief that droughts are a result of the sinfulness of man which leads to the breaking of human relationships and of the relationships between God and man and which in turn lead to disastrous consequences in the ecological order manifested in the form of droughts and other communal calamities of an ecological nature. Secondly, that by means of prayer, supplications and offerings people can secure good relationships with God and their ancestral spirits as guardians of the land and that this can lead to an equilibrium in the ecological order the consequences of which are a good supply of rain from God - the Rain Giver.

These religious beliefs in the Bimbi cult are expressed, by and large, in the spiritual life of the Bimbi, his teaching, the rituals performed by him and by the people at the rain shrines and their religious symbols. These have shown that the Chewa's religious concepts and their relationship with the supernatural are determined largely by the prevailing ecosystems of their region. Within their context God and their relationship to him are best understood in so far as he is closely identified with the land - its fertility and productivity and an

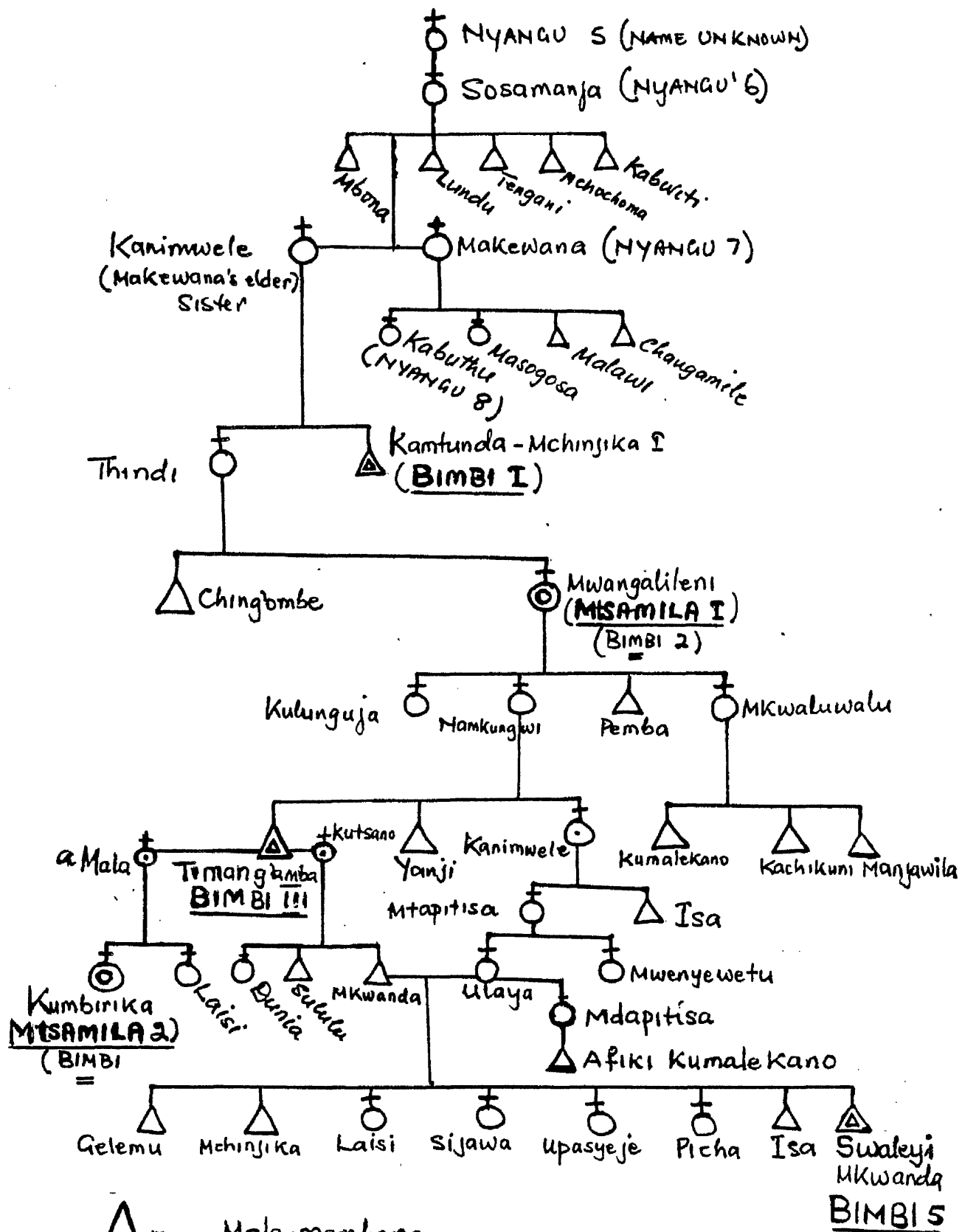
even supply of rain. This is manifested in the Chewa's names for God which are expressive of their agro-economic concerns. In this way the Bimbi cult exemplifies a distinctive earth-based religious ideology with God at the centre.

We have also noted that the role of the ancestral spirits and their interaction with their descendants is also reflective of an agricultural economy in which social relationships between the living and between the living and the living-dead are based on their relationship to the land. The ancestral spirits are guardians of the land in whose care it has been entrusted by no lesser power than God himself.

One of the distinctive features of the Bimbi cult, as far as the present study has shown, is the involvement of political heads in religious matters presided over by Bimbi. This participation of the chiefs has given the Bimbi cult a lasting effect in the lives of the many people who are required to participate with their chiefs or village headmen in agricultural rituals prescribed by Bimbi year after year or when a crisis occurs. Although there are fundamental conflicting economic and political interests between the Bimbi and the chiefs these differences, as far as I was able to observe, are played down in order to meet the economic interests of the wider community to such an extent that they are more of a reconciling than disruptive nature. This makes the way the Bimbi operates quite different from the way in which the spirit medium in the Mbona cult functions where conflict between the chiefs and the medium is a dominant feature. It has also been indicated in this study that the relationship between Islam and Christianity on the one hand and the Bimbi cult on the other has been one of confrontation especially in more recent years. This is because rituals performed in the Bimbi cult have continued to

draw a substantial number of christians and muslims alike. One thing which has come out of this study is that Islam and Christianity have not taken seriously within their religious belief systems the agricultural concerns of the Chewa, mainly the concern with the fertility of the land which is believed to be secured and enhanced by religious observances. It appears that for as long as this trend continues christians and muslims in the Upper Shire Valley will continue to lead an ambivalent life and bound to change allegiances in times of crisis of agricultural nature.

Finally, it has also been noted that despite the cult's members participation in Islam and Christianity there has been no attempt to equate the Bimbi cult with either Islam or Christianity. There has been, for instance, no attempt to christologise any of the founding members of Bimbiship as is the case in the Mbona cult where the Mbona has sometimes been called Yesu Wakuda (Black Jesus).² In the eyes of the Bimbi this seems to be a false religious consciousness and a confusion of issues. What makes the Bimbi cult rather unique is its unswerving determination to remain uniquely African in nature, functions and theology.

SWALEYI MKWANDA BIMBI'S GENEALOGY

- △ ---- Male members
 ♀ ---- Female members
 △ ---- Male Bimbi
 ◎ ---- Female Bimbi

KeySource:

Swaley's Mkwanda Bimbi,
 25/4/85.

APPENDIX B: REGNAL LISTS(a) For Bimbi

<u>DATE</u>	<u>BIMBI</u>	<u>EVENTS</u>
c.1807-37	Mchinjika (Male (Kamtunda)	The first Bimbi for whom account is less mythical
1837-67	Mtsamila I (Female) (Mangalileni)	Succeeded Mchinjika. Was killed by Ngoni warriors c. 1865.
1867-1927	Timang'amba (Male) (Nkholi-nkholi)	Succeeded Mtsamila I almost immediately as a response to Ngoni invasions. Probably had the longest reign of all the Bimbis. Peace Treaty with Kanjerenjere at Chilanga after the Ngoni wars.
1927-57	Mtsamila II (Female) (Akumbirika)	Succeeded Timang'amba. Died in 1957.
1959-	Swaleyi Mkwanda (Male)	Succeeded Akumbirika in 1959. Still in office.

Source: Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, Bimbi village, Kalembo, Machinga, 16/8/79.

(b) For Liwonde

<u>DATE</u>	<u>CHIEF</u>	<u>EVENTS</u>
c.1804-34	Liwonde I	Died in Mozambique
1834-64	Liwonde II	Died in Mozambique
1864-94	Kanjerenjere (Liwonde I in MW)	Peace Treaty with Timang'amba Bimbi. Died at Chilanga
1894-1924	Mboga (Liwonde II in MW)	Lived east of the Shire River. Fought against the whites. Died during the 1st World War.

<u>DATE</u>	<u>CHIEF</u>	<u>EVENTS</u>
1924-54	Mwachande (Liwonde III in MW)	Moved the capital to Mbonechela. Died there sometime 1953-54
1954-	Mwedadi Kananji (Liwonde IV in MW)	Succeeded Mwachande in 1954. Ruled as Sitola III for one year. Still ruling.

Sources: Mwedadi Kananji Liwonde, Mbonechela, 31/7/79
Kaunda Sitola, Sitola village, 9/8/79.

APPENDIX CAncestral spirits mentioned in rituals and prayers in the thesis

Those marked (T) are territorial spirits and those marked (Y) and (N) are Yao and Ngoni ancestral spirits respectively.

Bongwe (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit who is believed to control the rainfall. He is believed to reside in a form of a snake in Bimbi shrine in Mponda Forest at Ulongwe. Bongwe is said to have been once a Chewa head of a lineage which cannot be traced now. Possesses Bimbi during <u>chilewe</u> ritual dance.
Chapita (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit believed to have been once head of a Chewa lineage which cannot be traced now. His role is not defined.
Chibalala (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. He is believed to have been Nyangu's grandson and head of a Chewa lineage which has not yet been identified.
Chingwalungwalu (Y)	Yao ancestral spirit. Was chief Mtsamala's son. He was the first Yao paramount chief in Bimbi heartland now identified with chief Kalembo the present paramount chief.
Chilembwe (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Believed to be Nyangu's husband co-founder of the Nyangu chiefdom.
Chikang'ombe	Tumbuka people's snake-spirit believed to control rainfall in Tumbukaland.
Chilambi (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.

Chimdikiti (N)	Ngoni ancestral spirit. Identified with the ruling house of the present Chimdikiti village headmanship.
Chimombo (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Chipojola (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Danga (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Fumbi (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Hoba (N)	Ngoni ancestral spirit. Identified with the present holder of the Hoba village headmanship.
Kalembo (Y)	Yao ancestral spirit. Identified with the present holder of Kalembo chiefship (chief Yasini Amini Kalembo at Ulongwe in Bimbi heartland).
Kalonga (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Chief of chiefs. Founder of the Chewa nation.
Kalonga Akubanda (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit whose lineage has been absorbed in Mkanda lineage.
Kapapa (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit believed to have healing power thus a controller of epidemics and general illnesses. Not yet identified with a particular lineage.
Kuugule (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Makalani (Y)	Yao ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Makhanga (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Makhaya (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Malombola (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Mchelecheta (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.

Mchinjika (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Believed to be the first Bimbi of the Phiri clan. A title held by all male Bimbis.
Mkanda (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit identified with the holders of Mkanda village headmanship.
Mkulukutwa (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit and the most renowned of them all because of his hatred of white domination. He is believed to have taken all his people and went to live under the waters of Lake Malombe. He is one of the spirits responsible for the making of a Bimbi. Not yet identified with a particular lineage.
Mmanga (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Identified with the present holder of Mmanga village headmanship. Mmanga is believed to be one of the early Chewa village headmen to have authority to have a Bimbi rain shrine.
Mmaniwa (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit and believed to be Nyangu's son. He is identified with the present holder of Mmaniwa village headmanship.
Mpango (Y)	Yao ancestral spirit and identified with the present holder of Mpango village headmanship.
Mponda (Y)	Yao ancestral spirit and identified with the present holder of Mponda chieftaincy.
Msamala (Y)	Yao ancestral spirit identified with the present holder of the Msamala chieftaincy.
Mtangaluwembe (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified with a particular lineage. He is believed to have power over the eastern wind (<u>yuma</u>).
Mtondo-wa-nthenga (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Mtsamila I & II (T)	Chewa ancestral spirits. Believed to be the second and third Bimbis of the Phiri clan. Title held by female Bimbis as against male Bimbis who are known as Mchinjika.

Mtuwa (Y)	Yao ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Nakhau (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Namaleyo (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified with a particular lineage.
Namanje (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Founder of the present Kasenjera lineage. Represented now by Anubi Chipande Chekwenda.
Namichenje (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Namkwawalala (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Nyangu (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Ancestress of the Chewa nation from whom the Chewa of the Phiri clan trace their descent. Lady Paramount of the Upper Shire Valley in pre-colonial times.
Nyenvu (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Phungu (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Sakasaka (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit believed to have power over rain clouds. Invoked at <u>milawe</u> ceremonies for this purpose. Not yet identified with a particular lineage.
Sinyanda (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Sokopio (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit believed to possess Bimbi during <u>milawe</u> (possession seance). Not yet identified.
Songwe (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Thombolombo (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Timang'amba (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. A third Bimbi of the Phiri royal clan. He is popularly known as Mchinjika and sometimes known as Nkholinkholi. He is the grandfather of the present Bimbi.

Tyolampanda (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Ukalanga (T)	Yao ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.
Zembe (T)	Chewa ancestral spirit. Not yet identified.

APPENDIX D

THE QADIRIYA AND THE SUKUTI BROTHERHOODS

Muslims in Malawi can be divided into two broad categories namely followers of Qadiriya and Sukuti brotherhoods. Scholars have it that Qadiriya brotherhood was founded by Abd al-Qadir (1077-1166) whose school in Baghdad became very popular and whose teachings spread to Syria, Egypt and Yemen and later throughout the Islamic world.¹ The Qadiriya brotherhood entered Malawi by the way of the Arab trader and Muslim teachers.

Al-Qadir's doctrine is said to have been fairly orthodox but with mystical interpretations of the Quran. Those who belong to the Qadiriya movement in Malawi have elaborate mortuary ritual ceremonies. They sing at funerals, read itima and mawlid and say prayers. They also eat sadaka as part of funeral observances in the form of tatu (third), saba (seventh) and alubaini (fortieth) so called because they are carried out at intervals of three, seven and forty days after the funeral. They also perform dhikir (dancing and singing at the mosque or at home). Besides, they favour jando (circumcision for boys). They consider all these rituals as sanctioned by the Quran.²

The Sukuti brotherhood which is also known as Shadhiliya began to have its impact in the 1930's. If the connection between Sukuti and Shadhiliya is correct then the beginnings of Sukuti must be traced back to Abu 'al-Hassan Ali bin Abd-Allah Al-Shadhili (1196-1258). Scholars have it that his main aim was to inculcate high morality on his followers. The five principles of his system were: (1) fear of Allah, (2) adherence to the suna in words and deeds,

(3) contempt of mankind in prosperity and adversity, (4) resignation to the will of Allah and (5) having recourse to Allah in joy and sorrow.³ These principles seem to be the driving force behind Sukuti brotherhood which differs in a number of aspects from Qadiriya. Sukuti followers do not have elaborate funeral rituals, they do not sing, they do not perform dhikir and they do not eat sadaka. The basis of their belief is utter resignation to Allah and observe silence especially during funeral rites. They condemn as unscriptural many of the rituals observed by the followers of Qadiriya whom they accuse of the sin of shirk (mixing Islamic faith with traditional beliefs). They consider themselves as backed by the Quran both in their beliefs and practices therefore, they look upon themselves as spiritually superior to the followers of Qadiriya.⁴



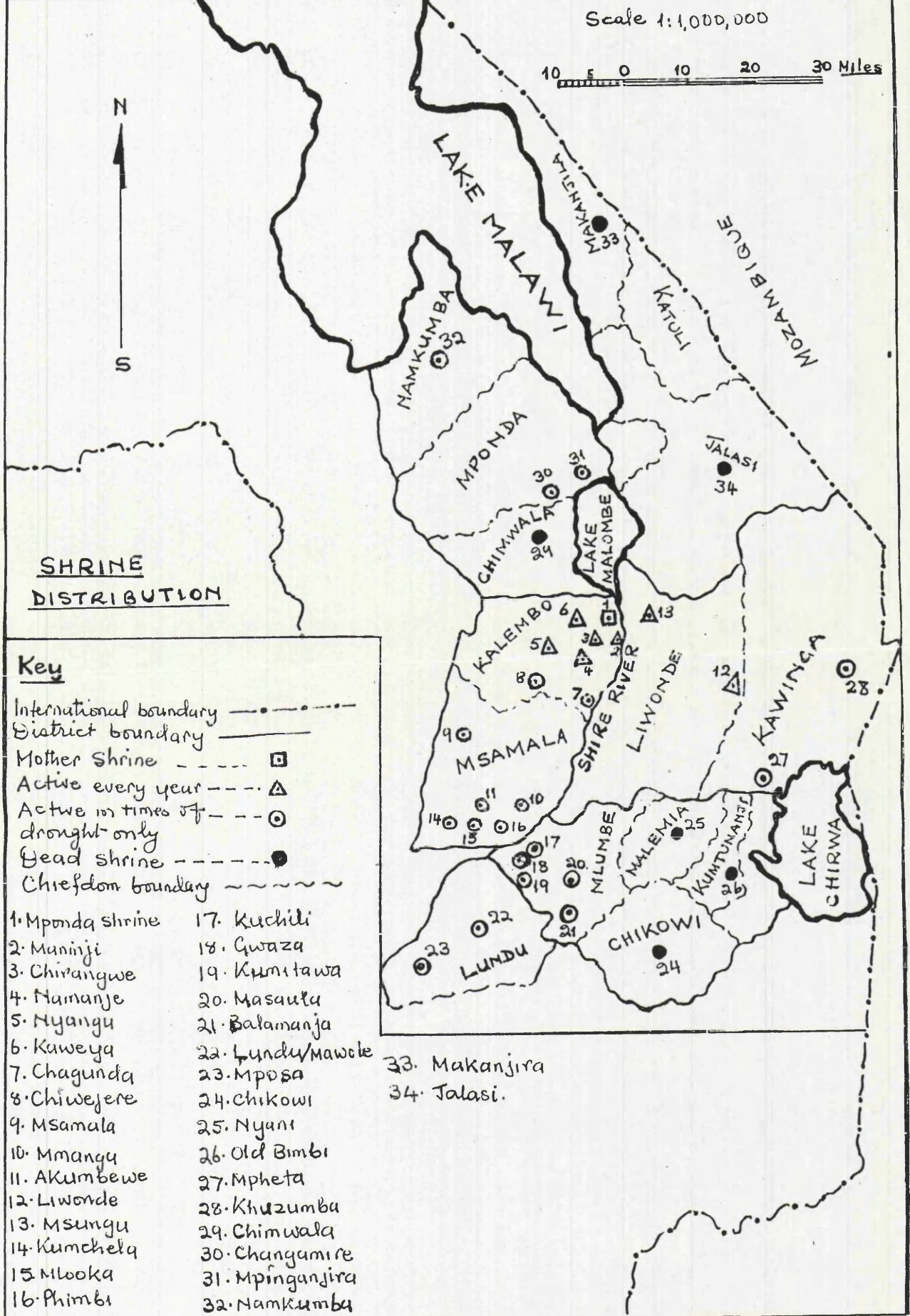
SHRINE DISTRIBUTION

Key

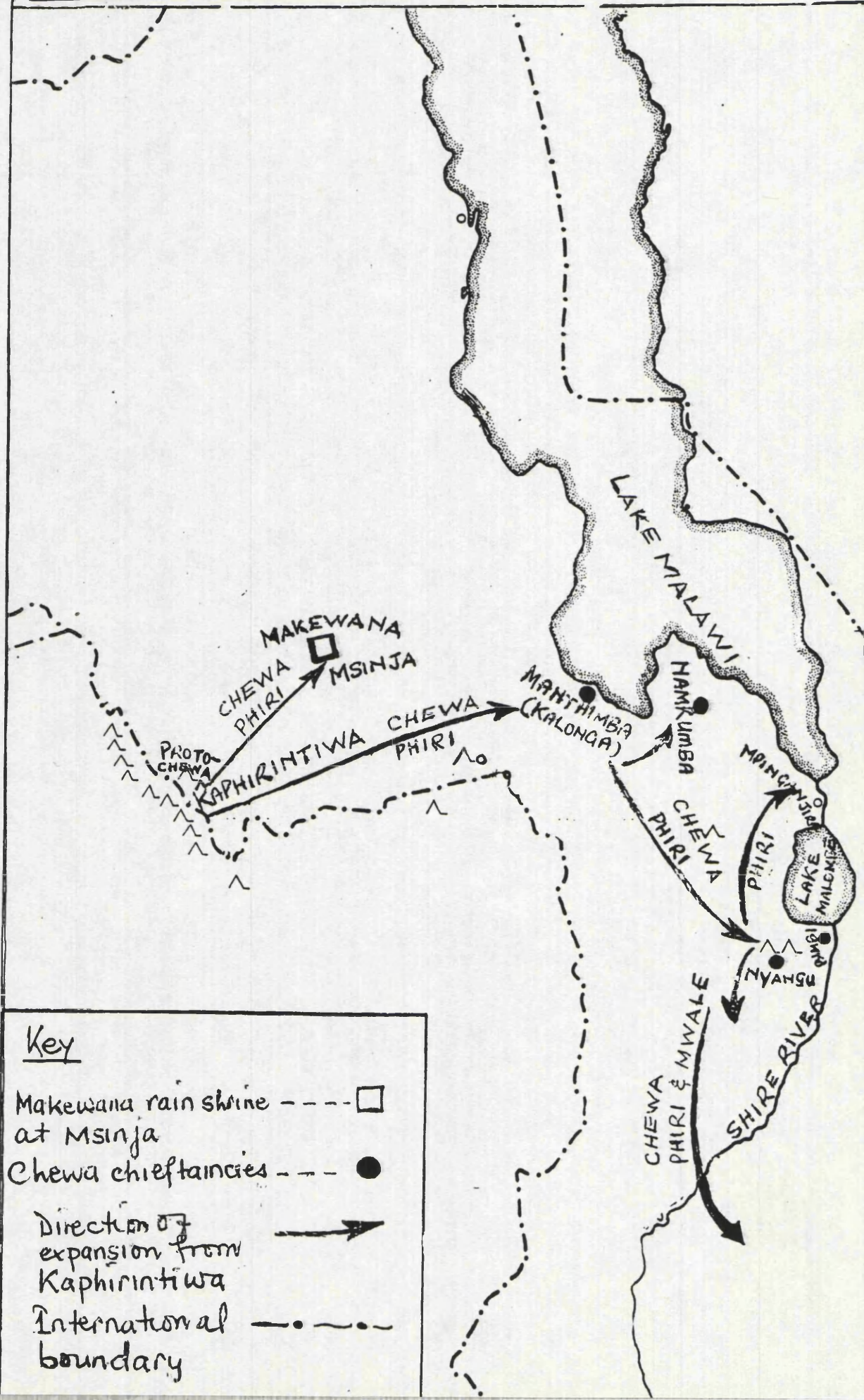
- International boundary ————
 District boundary ————
 Mother Shrine ———— □
 Active every year ———— △
 Active in times of drought only ———— ○
 Head shrine ———— ●
 Chiefdom boundary ~~~~~

- | | |
|------------------|------------------|
| 1. Mponda shrine | 17. Kuchili |
| 2. Muninji | 18. Gwaza |
| 3. Chirangwe | 19. Kunitawa |
| 4. Namanye | 20. Masaula |
| 5. Nyangu | 21. Balamanja |
| 6. Kaweya | 22. Lyndu/Mawole |
| 7. Chagunda | 23. Mposa |
| 8. Chiwejere | 24. Chikowi |
| 9. Msamala | 25. Nyani |
| 10. Mmangu | 26. Old Bimbi |
| 11. Akumbewe | 27. Mpheta |
| 12. Liwonde | 28. Khuzumba |
| 13. Msungu | 29. Chimwala |
| 14. Kumchela | 30. Changamire |
| 15. Mlooka | 31. Mpinganjira |
| 16. Phimbi | 32. Namkumba |

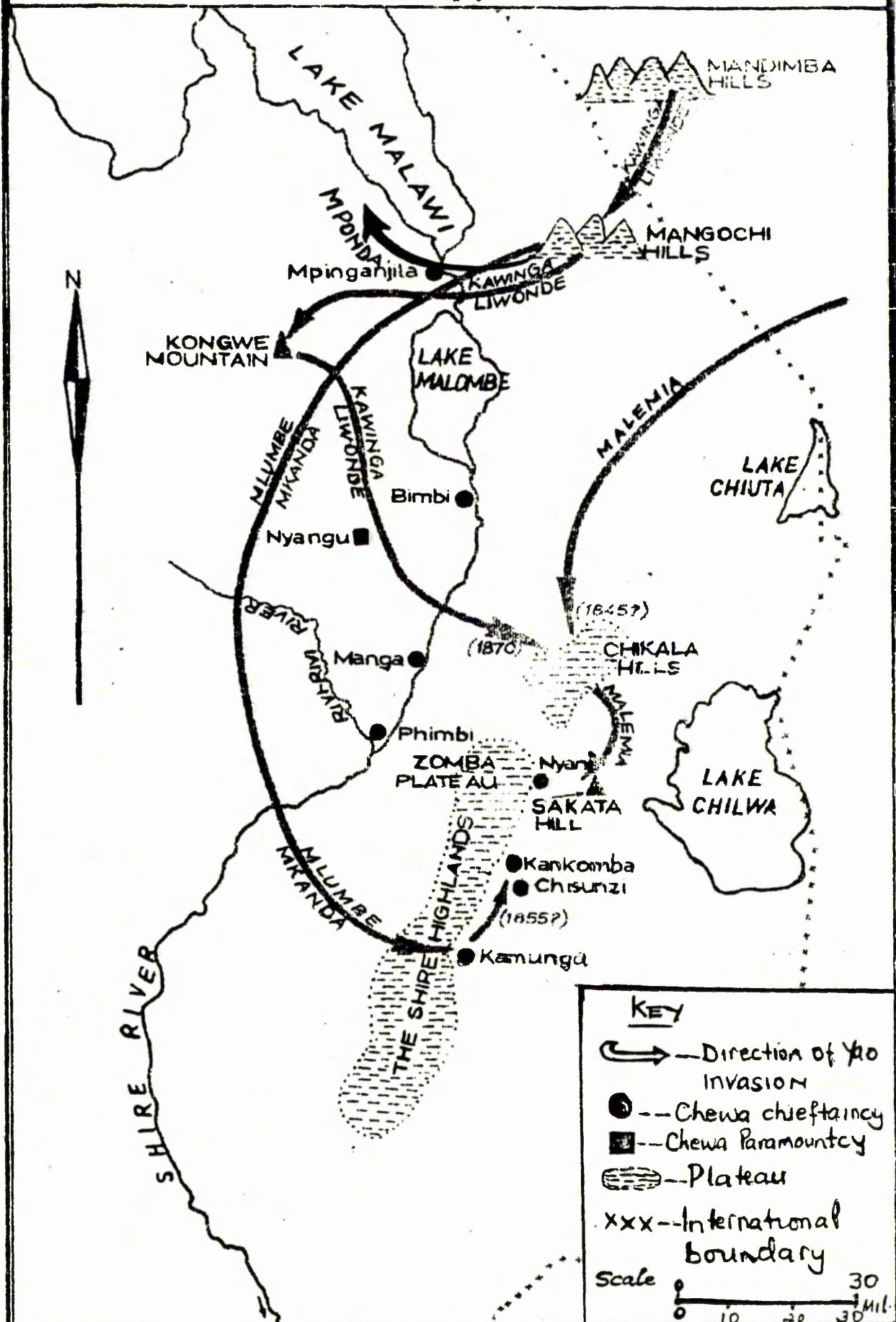
33. Makanjira
 34. Talasi.



CHEWA EXPANSION C1500—1790'S



CHEWA CHIEFTAINCIES AND THE YAO INVASION (UPPER SHIRE VALLEY) C-1840 1870



FOOTNOTESChapter 1

- 1 Oral Tradition (hereafter O.T.) from Grace Mary Useni, Kasenjera village, Traditional Authority (hereafter T.A.), Kalembo, Machinga, 9/10/84. This informant belongs to Kasenjera lineage which is close to the present Bimbi's lineage and claims she saw Mtsamila II in her family circles.
- 2 Personal communication with Professor George Shepperson, University of Edinburgh, 13/4/84.
- 3 Written references about the cult appear as early as 1907 when Dr. H.S. Stannus, then Medical Doctor in K.A.R., writes that during the 1907 drought in Mangochi, chief Mponda and his village headmen consulted Bimbi at Ulongwe. Another reference is made by Archdeacon B. Eyre in his account of his trip down the Shire River with Padre Jenkins in Likoma Diocesan Quarterly Paper, No. 21, October, 1908, p. 351.
- 4 G.M. Sanderson, A Dictionary of the Yao Language, The Government Printer, Zomba, 1954, p. 27.
- 5 Personal communication with Michael Mann, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 22/1/86.
- 6 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, Bimbi village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 6/7/85.
- 7 David C. Scott, A Cyclopaedic Dictionary of the Mang'anja Language, Foreign Mission Committee, Edinburgh, 1892, p. 35.
- 8 Op. cit., p. 36.
- 9 Op. cit., p. 36.
- 10 Op. cit., p. 36.
- 11 O.T. from Mkanda Maganga, Mkanda village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 9/1/85.
- 12 O.T. from Alexander Manjaule, Kapapa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 9/10/84.

- 13 O.T. from Group village headman Hinda-Hinda, Hinda-Hinda village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 12/2/85.
- 14 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 22/4/85.
- 15 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 6/7/85.
- 16 Scott, A Cyclopaedic Dictionary p. 81.
- 17 Op. cit., p. 81.
- 18 Op. cit., p. 619.
- 19 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 6/7/85.
- 20 O.T. from Grace Mary Useni 9/10/84.
- 21 O.T. from Anubi Chipande Chekwenda, Kasenjera village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 10/10/84.
- 22 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 23/4/85.
- 23 See appendix A. This genealogy was given to me by Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi. Although its reliability can be questioned, it appears to contain a great deal of valuable data which I was not able to get elsewhere. 23/4/85.
- 24 According to Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, the name Mchinjika has sometimes been given to children in the Bimbi lineage without implying the inheritance of spiritual power. The name Bimbi, however, is never used as a proper name. It is acquired only after spirit possession when one becomes a spirit medium of the Bimbi cult. 22/4/85.
- 25 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 23/5/85.
- 26 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 23/5/85.
- 27 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 23/5/85.
- 28 Likoma Diocesan Quarterly Paper, No. 21, October, 1908, p. 351.
- 29 Nyasaland Diocesan Chronicle, No. 73, October, 1921, p. 17.
- 30 Op. cit., p. 17.
- 31 O.T. from Sheikh Useni Twaibu Mwalabu, Mwalabu village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 4/5/85.
- 32 Nyasaland Diocesan Chronicle, October, 1937, p. 13.

- 33 Nyasaland Diocesan Chronicle, October, 1916,
p. 25.
- 34 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 23/3/85.
- 35 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 23/3/85.
- 36 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 22/4/85.
- 37 O.T. from Sumani Salimu Chiyaka, Chiyaka village,
T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 15/11/84.
- 38 O.T. from Nandumbo Kasira, Nandumbo village,
T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 10/10/84.
- 39 Ad de Vries, Dictionary of Symbols, North Holland
Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1974, p. 263.
- 40 See "Rituals performed by Bimbi" where this has
been discussed in detail.
- 41 O.T. from Kambani Zitthe White, Maninji village,
T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 14/11/84.
- 42 Ad. de Vries, Dictionary of Symbols p. 248.
- 43 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 23/3/85.
During my field work I was not able to verify
this from official records in the National
Archives in Zomba because there was virtually
no official reference to this prohibition in
the records there.
- 44 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 6/7/85.
- 45 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 23/3/85.
- 46 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 23/3/85.
- 47 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 23/3/85.
- 48 O.T. from Nandumbo Kasira 10/10/84.
- 49 J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, Routledge
and Kegan Paul, London, 1962, p. 97.
- 50 Bimbi sees man as potentially immortal. He has
a belief in the resurrection of the dead. This
may likely be the influence of Islam upon him
or even Christian influence.
- 51 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 23/3/85.
- 52 O.T. from Che Mbungu, Mdenga village, T.A.
Kalembo, Machinga, 26/2/85.
- 53 J. Lindblom, Prophecy in Ancient Israel, Blackwell,
Oxford, 1962, p. 6.

- 54 O.T. from Grace Mary Useni 9/10/84.
- 55 O.T. from Che Mbungo 26/2/85.
- 56 Lindblom, Prophecy in Ancient Israel pp. 1-2.
- 57 O.T. from Kudawe Chiwere, Kudawe village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 22/2/85.
- 58 O.T. from Che Mbungo 26/2/85.
- 59 Lindblom, Prophecy in Ancient Israel p. 33.
- 60 Upper Shire District Book, Vol. II, 1910-1913, Zomba National Archives, pp. 3-4.
- 61 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 6/7/85.
- 62 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 16/9/83.
- 63 M.G. Marwick, "Notes on Some Chewa Rituals", in African Studies, Vol. 27, No. 1, 1968, p. 4.
- 64 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 22/7/85.
- 65 Marwick, "Notes on some Chewa Rituals", p. 6.
- 66 Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1966, p. 151.
- 67 E.J. and J.D. Krige cited in J.V. Taylor, The Primal Vision, SCM, London, 1963, p. 185.
- 68 Ad de Vries, Dictionary of Symbols p. 409.
- 69 O.T. from Grace Mary Useni 9/10/84.
- 70 E.J. Krige and J.D. Krige, The Realm of the Rain-Queen, Oxford University Press, London, 1943, p. 167.
- 71 J. Beattie, Bunyoro: An African Kingdom, Holt Rinehart and Winston Inc., New York, 1960, p. 26.
- 72 O.T. from Mkanda Maganga, 9/1/85.
- 73 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 14/11/84.
- 74 Nyasaland Diocesan Chronicle, 1927 p. 8.
- 75 Op. cit., p. 9.
- 76 Ad de Vries, Dictionary of Symbols p. 72.
- 77 Op. cit., p. 481.

- 78 O.T. from Kudawe Chiwere 22/2/85.
- 79 O.T. from Joseph Douglas Mmanga, Mmanga village,
T.A. Msamala, Machinga, 25/8/79.
- 80 J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols p. 48.
- 81 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 17/9/83.
- 82 Personal observation, Bimbi village, 6/7/85.
- 83 O.T. from Sheikh Janati Yasini, Kalembo village,
T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 29/10/84.
- 84 O.T. from Kudawe Chiwere 22/2/85.
- 85 O.T. from mwalimu Idilisa Mangusu, Mkamwana
village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 14/4/85.
- 86 Canon Laurence Chisui, Kalilole wa wana, The
University's Mission Press, Likoma, 1950, p. 46.
- 87 Max Weber, Economy and Society, Vol. II,
Bedminster Press, New York, 1968, p. 450.
- 88 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 13/4/85.
- 89 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 13/4/85.

Chapter 2

- 1 David C. Scott, A Cyclopaedic Dictionary of the
Mang'anja Language, Foreign Mission Committee
of the Church of Scotland, 1892, p. 627.
- 2 O.T. from Abasi Tambala Lai, Tambala village,
T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 29/10/84.
- 3 O.T. from Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka, Chiyaka village,
T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 15/11/84.
- 4 O.T. from Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka 15/11/84.
- 5 O.T. from Abasi Tambala Lai 29/11/84.
- 6 O.T. from Sumani Sumaili Chiyake 15/11/84.
- 7 O.T. from Nandumbo Kasira, Nandumbo village,
T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 11/10/84.
- 8 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, Bimbi village,
T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 23/3/85.

- 9 O.T. from Anubi Chipande Chekwenda, Kasenjera village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 10/10/84. See also chapter on "The Concept of God in the Bimbi cult" where the nature and role of the ancestral spirits have been discussed in detail.
- 10 O.T. from Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka 15/11/84.
- 11 O.T. from Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka 15/11/84. Unfortunately Chiyaka did not give me examples or names of people who had experienced spirit possession on instalment basis. Chiyaka's ideas, however, were verified by Afiki Kumalekano according to whom the possession process to Bimbishop is a lengthy one.
- 12 O.T. from Misaku biti Ndelemanani, Chindamba village, Subtraditional Authority Chowe, Mangochi, 17/4/85. Misaku Ndelemanani's spirit possession is an example of what is called majini. It is an apparent form of sickness which in some cases needs treatment by a medicine man.
- 13 W.H.J. Rangeley, "Two Nyasaland Rain Shrines", in The Nyasaland Journal Vol. 5, No. 2, 1952, pp. 34-35.
- 14 O.T. from Abasi Tambala Lai 29/10/84.
- 15 Timang'amba Bimbi is also known as Nkholi-nkholi. According to Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, Nkholi-nkholi was in fact a nickname given to Timang'amba Bimbi because he was often fond of beer and walked with his face down. In Chichewa nkholi means "stooping the head far down" as when one is drunk.
- 16 O.T. from Kudawe Chiwere, Kudawe village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 22/2/85.
- 17 O.T. from Kudawe Chiwere 22/2/85.
- 18 O.T. from Nandumbo Kasira 11/10/84.
- 19 O.T. from Afiki Kumalekano, Old Bimbi village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 11/10/84.
- 20 O.T. from Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka 15/11/84.
- 21 Many village headmen have tax-role government books. They always identify these as the source of power for their headmanship. When these books are withdrawn they resent it fearing that their headmanship has been terminated.
- 22 Max Weber, Theory of Social and Economic Organization, The Free Press, New York, 1947, p. 359.

- 23 O.T. from Abasi Tambala Lai 29/10/84.
See also chapter on "Structure and Power" where
cult leaders have been discussed in detail.
Abasi Tambala's evidence seems to be reliable.
He is one of the key figures in the Bimbi cult
and his account was supported by village headman
Chiyaka.
- 24 O.T. from Ali Nyama, Nyama village, T.A. Liwonde,
Machinga, 9/8/79. Ali Nyama is a leading
official at chief Liwonde's court. He is well
versed in the affairs of Bimbiship.
- 25 Ad de Vries, Dictionary of Symbols, North Holland
Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1974, p. 473.
- 26 O.T. from Abasi Tambala Lai 29/10/84.
- 27 O.T. from Ali Nyama 9/8/79.
- 28 O.T. from Sadiku Kapoto, Chikumba village, T.A.
Kalembo, Machinga, 17/8/79.
- 29 Victor Turner, The Forest of Symbols: Aspects
of Ndembu Ritual, Cornell University Press,
London, 1967, p. 96.
- 30 Weber, Theory of Social and Economic Organization
..... p. 359.
- 31 Other ancestral spirits' names are mentioned
such as those on appendix C.
- 32 O.T. from Ali Nyama 9/8/79.
- 33 These comprise any of the village headmen who come
to Bimbi for milawe from Ulongwe chiefs among
whom are Mmaniwa, Kasenjera, Malidade, Mkanda
Maganga and others.
- 34 O.T. from Abasi Tambala Lai 29/10/84.
- 35 Rangeley, "Two Nyasaland Rain Shrines",
p. 35.
- 36 A. Rita-Ferreira, Os Cheuas da Macanga, Memorias
do Instituto de Investigacao Cientifica de
Mocambique, 1966, pp. 203-4.
- 37 It appears from oral tradition that in the case
of the present Bimbi his spirit wife is Alusi
biti Imani.
- 38 J.C. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, Routledge
& Kegan Paul, London, 1962, p. 43.
- 39 Ad. de Vries, Dictionary of Symbols p. 35.

- 40 Sorghum flour is used for offering purposes during initiation ceremonies as jando (circumcision) and chiputu (for girls).
- 41 O.T. from Anubi Chipande Chekwenda 10/10/84.
- 42 O.T. from Ali Nyama 9/8/79.
- 43 O.T. from Ali Nyama 9/8/79.
- 44 O.T. from Ali Nyama 9/8/79.
- 45 See chapter on "Structure and Power" where this has been discussed in detail.
- 46 O.T. from Ali Nyama 9/8/79.
- 47 O.T. from Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka 15/11/84.
- 48 J.E. Cirlot, Dictionary of Symbols p. 85.
- 49 O.T. from Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka 15/11/84.
- 50 See "Bimbi: A Personal Portrait" where this has been discussed.
- 51 O.T. from Ali Nyama 9/8/79.
- 52 O.T. from Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka 15/11/84.
- 53 J.E. Cirlot, Dictionary of Symbols p. 47.
- 54 O.T. from Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka 15/11/84.
- 55 O.T. from Kudawe Chiwere 18/8/79.
- 56 See for example 1 Kings, Chap. 18, vv. 45-46.
- 57 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 14/11/84.
- 58 O.T. from Grace Mary Useni, Kasenjera village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 9/10/84.
- 59 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 15/11/84.
- 60 O.T. from Afiki Kumalekano 17/9/83.
- 61 James A. H. Murray (ed.), A New English Dictionary Vol. 10, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1888, p. 249.
- 62 James Hastings, (ed.), Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. 10, 1918, p. 122.
- 63 Op. cit., p. 122.
- 64 O.T. from Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka 15/11/84.

- 65 Traditions differ. According to Afiki Kumalekano Bimbi climbed a mtondo tree first. Nandumbo Kasira, however, contends that Swaleyi Mkwanda climbed a mkuyu tree first before climbing the njale tree.
- 66 All my informants agree on this.
- 67 O.T. from Abasi Tambala Lai 29/10/84.
- 68 O.T. from Jilati biti Nedi, Kamwana village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 22/10/84.
- 69 O.T. from Abasi Tambala Lai 29/10/84.
- 70 O.T. from Alexander Manjaule, Kapapa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 9/10/84.
- 71 O.T. from Nandumbo Kasira 11/10/84.
- 72 O.T. from Nandumbo Kasira 11/10/84. I was not able to verify Nandumbo's account of the participation of the village headmen mentioned in the text because . they are all dead and their successors are too young to remember what went on in those days. Some of them appear to have been away at the time.
- 73 O.T. from Alexander Manjaule 9/10/84.
- 74 O.T. from Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka 15/11/84.
- 75 O.T. from Abasi Tambalal Lai 29/10/84.
- 76 O.T. from Abasi Tambala Lai 29/10/84.
- 77 O.T. from Abasi Tambala Lai 29/10/84.
- 78 See pages p.78 where the installation ceremony has been described in detail.
- 79 See chapter on "Myth and History" where succession conflict between Mtsamila II and Kumalekano has been discussed.
- 80 Abasi Tambala Lai is also known as Chibwana because he succeeded his father to ku-Tambala village headmanship. This was because his father's nephews were not capable of ruling the lineage.
- 81 O.T. from Alexander Manjaule 9/10/84.
- 82 O.T. from Nandumbo Kasira 11/10/84.
- 83 O.T. from Nandumbo Kasira 11/10/84.
- 84 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 22/4/85.

- 85 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 24/4/85.
 86 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 24/4/85.
 87 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 24/4/85.

Chapter 3

- 1 J.M. Schoffeleers, (ed.), Guardians of the Land, Mambo Press, Gwelo, 1979, pp. 1-2.
- 2 J.M. Schoffeleers, "The Interaction of the Mbona Cult and Christianity: 1859-1963", in T.O. Ranger & J. Weller, (eds.), Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa, Heinemann, London, 1975, p. 16.
- 3 Schoffeleers, (ed.), Guardians of the Land p. 6.
- 4 Thomas F. O'Dea, Sociology of Religion, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1966, p. 36.
- 5 J.M. Schoffeleers, "A Martyr Cult as a reflection on changes in production, the case of the Lower Shire Valley: 1590-1622, in African Perspective, 1978, pp. 22-24.
- 6 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, Bimbi village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 6/7/85.
- 7 A.S. Herbert in M. Black & H.H. Rowley, (eds.), Peak's Commentary on the Bible, Thomas Nelson and Sons, London, 1962, p. 469.
- 8 W.H. Rangeley, "Two Nyasaland Rain Shrines: Makewana - The Mother of All People", in The Nyasaland Journal, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1952, p. 36.
- 9 J.M. Schoffeleers, (ed.), Guardians of the Land p. 152.
- 10 J.M. Schoffeleers, "Cult idioms and the Dialectics of a Region" in R.P. Werbner, (ed.), Regional Cults, Academic Press, London, 1977, p. 220.
- 11 H.L. Vail, "Religion, Language and the Tribal Myth: the Tumbuka and Chewa in Malawi", in J.M. Schoffeleers, (ed.), Guardians of the Land p. 214.
- 12 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, Bimbi village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 6/7/85.

- 13 O.T. from Kambani White, Maninji village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 14/11/84.
- 14 O.T. from John Manuel Maninji, Maninji village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 9/1/85.
- 15 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 22/4/85.
- 16 O.T. from Afiki Kumalekano, Old Bimbi village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 11/10/84.
- 17 O.T. from Afiki Kumalekano 11/10/84.
- 18 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 6/7/85.
- 19 O.T. from Idilisa Ajitu Msungu, Saidi Msungu village, T.A. Liwonde, 8/7/85.
- 20 O.T. from Idilisa Ajitu Msungu 8/7/85.
- 21 O.T. from Idilisa Ajitu Msungu 8/7/85.
- 22 O.T. from Anubi Chipande Chekwenda, Kasenjera, village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 10/10/84.
- 23 See chapter on "The making of the Bimbi and the question of succession" where ku-Tambala's role has been discussed in detail.
- 24 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 25 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 6/7/85.
- 26 O.T. Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 27 O.T. from Anubi Chipande Chekwenda 10/10/84.
- 28 O.T. from Lawrence Mdala, Ligwangwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 14/11/84.
- 29 O.T. from Lawrence Mdala 14/11/84.
- 30 O.T. from Lawrence Mdala 14/11/84.
- 31 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 32 W.M.J. van Binsbergen, "Explorations in the History and Sociology of Territorial cults in Zambia", in J.M. Schoffeleers, (ed.), Guardians of the Land pp. 47-8.
- 33 Op. cit., p. 48.
- 34 Op. cit., p. 48.
- 35 J.C. Miller, Kings and Kinsmen, Early Mbundu States in Angola, Oxford Press, 1976, p. 69.

- 36 Victor Turner, The Forest of Symbols, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1967, p. 22.
- 37 Op. cit., p. 44.
- 38 I.N. Kimambo and C.K. Omari, "The Development of Religious Thought and Centres among the Pare", in T.O. Ranger & I. Kimambo, (eds.), The Historical Study of African Religion, Heinemann, London, 1972, pp. 114-5.
- 39 O.T. from Lawrence Mdala 14/11/84.
- 40 Kimambo and Omari, "The Development of Religious Thought", p. 115.
- 41 J.M. Schoffeleers, "Cult idioms", p. 221.
- 42 O.T. from Afiki Kumalekano and Kambani White, Bimbi village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 17/9/83.
- 43 O.T. from Kudawe Chiwere, Kudawe village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 7/1/85.
- 44 O.T. from Alexander Manjaule, Kapapa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 9/10/84.
- 45 Upper Shire District Book, Vol. 1, 1907-1955, National Archives, Zomba, pp. 179-80.
- 46 O.T. from Kumalekano and Kambani White 17/9/83.
- 47 O.T. from James Petro Mmaniwa, Mmaniwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 20/1/85.
- 48 O.T. from Chimbaye Juma and biti Juma, ku-Tambala village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 30/10/84.
- 49 O.T. from Yusufu Malidade, Isa Msakula, Biti Chaima Asimanye Wandu and Ayana biti Msakula, Malidade village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 8/1/85.
- 50 O.T. from John Manuel Maninji 9/1/85.
- 51 O.T. from Anubi Chipande Chekwenda 10/10/84.
- 52 O.T. from Idilisa Ajitu, 8/7/85.
- 53 O.T. from Mwedadi Kananji Liwonde, Mbonechela village, T.A. Liwonde, Machinga, 7/7/85.
- 54 O.T. from Chesoyaga Kunitawa, Kunitawa village, T.A. Mlumbe, Zomba, 18/9/85.
- 55 O.T. from Swizan John Balamanja, Balamanja village, T.A. Mlumbe, Zomba, 18/9/85.

- 56 O.T. from J.N. Chimkango, Kuchili village,
T.A. Mlumbe, Zomba, 18/9/85.
- 57 O.T. from village headman Masaula, Masaula
village, T.A. Mlumbe, Zomba, 18/9/85.
- 58 O.T. from Chief Charles Lundu, Linjidzi village,
T.A. Lundu, Blantyre, 18/9/85.
- 59 O.T. from Changamire Mdala, Changamire village,
T.A. Mponda, Mangochi, 15/4/85.
- 60 O.T. from Francisco Dickson Chagunda, Chagunda
village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 13/2/85.
- 61 O.T. from Chembungo, Mdenga village, T.A.
Kalembo, Machinga, 26/2/85.
- 62 O.T. from Mwalabu Sumani Mpinganjira,
Mpinganjira village, T.A. Mponda, Mangochi,
15/4/85.
- 63 O.T. from Alisen Chiwere and Daudi Salifu,
Msamala village, T.A. Msamala, Machinga, 5/2/85.
- 64 O.T. from Joseph Douglas Mmanga, Mmanga village,
T.A. Msamala, Machinga, 12/2/85.
- 65 J.M. Schoffeleers, "The Chisumphi and Mbona
cults in Malawi: A comparative history", in J.M.
Schoffeleers, (ed.), Guardians of the Land
..... p. 155.
- 66 J. Clyde Mitchell, "Chidzere's Tree: A Note on
a Shona Land-Shrine and its Significance", in
NADA, Salisbury, 1961, p. 31.
- 67 J. Clyde Mitchell, "African Peoples", in
W.V. Beresford, (ed.), Handbook to the Federation
of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, London, 1960, p. 128.
- 68 J.M. Schoffeleers, "Ways of Remembering the
Past: Oral History among the Fipa and the
Mang'anja", Seminar paper presented at SOAS on
African History, 1982, p. 4.
- 69 Schoffeleers, (ed.), Guardians", p. 5.
- 70 J.M. Schoffeleers, "Ways of Remembering the Past
.....", p. 4.
- 71 O.T. from Mwedadi Kananji Liwonde 7/7/85.
- 72 O.T. from Mwedadi Kananji Liwonde 7/7/85.
- 73 O.T. from Mwedadi Kananji Liwonde 7/7/85.

- 74 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 6/7/85.
- 75 O.T. from Idilisa Ajitu Msungu 8/7/85.
- 76 O.T. from Group village headman Mpango Wadi Msilo, Mpango village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 10/10/84.
- 77 O.T. from Kudawe Chiwere 22/2/85.
- 78 See for example chapter on "The Bimbi cult and its interaction with Islam and Christianity" where Kalembo's role in the conflict between Islam and the cult is discussed.
- 79 O.T. from Group village headman Swizan John Balamanja, 18/9/85.
- 80 O.T. from Swizan John Balamanja 18/9/85.
- 81 Padi Makalani, one of the oldest members in Mponda chiefdom, told me that in the past Mponda chiefs used to approach Bimbi directly in times of drought, 19/8/83.
- 82 O.T. from Group village headman Mwalabu Sumani Mpinganjira 15/4/85.
- 83 O.T. from Mwalabu Sumani Mpinganjira 15/4/85.
- 84 O.T. from Charles Lundu 18/9/85.
- 85 O.T. from Group village headman Arnold Frederick, Old Bimbi village, T.A. Kumtumanji, Zomba, 17/5/85.
- 86 I was with Swaleyi Mkwanda when he paid his official visit to Arnold Frederick. Arnold claims to be a descendant of Timang'amba Bimbi.
- 87 O.T. from Chrighton Kuchanga Mpheta, Mpheta village, T.A. Kawinga, Machinga, 8/9/79.
- 88 O.T. from Alisen Chiwere 5/2/85.
- 89 J.M. Schoffeleers, "Cult idioms", pp. 230-1.

Chapter 4

- 1 Curt Sachs, World History of the Dance, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1938, p. 3.
- 2 Benjamin Ray, African Religions, Prentice Hall, Englewood, 1976, p. 17.

- 3 Evan M. Zuesse, Ritual Cosmos: the Sanctification of Life in African Religions, Ohio, University Press, Anthens, 1979, p. 238.
- 4 Op. cit., p. 242.
- 5 Op. cit., p. 9.
- 6 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, Bimbi village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 25/7/85.
- 7 David Scott, A Cyclopaedic Dictionary of the Mang'anja Language, Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland, Edinburgh, 1892, p. 94.
- 8 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 25/7/85.
Many people remember that Bimbi performed chilewe dance in 1961, 1962, 1965, 1979 and 1982.
- 9 David Scott, A Cyclopaedic Dictionary p. 677.
- 10 Op. cit., p. 295.
- 11 J.M. Schoffeleers, "The Religious Significance of bush fires in Malawi", in Cahier des Religions Africaines, No. 11, Vol. 5, 1971, p. 274.
- 12 Op. cit., p. 275.
- 13 O.T. from Henry Chisinkha, Chisinkha village, T.A. Msamala, Machinga, 10/8/79.
- 14 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 6/7/85.
- 15 See section on shrine organisation where these have been discussed in detail.
- 16 See chapter on "Structure and Power" where Kambani White's role has been discussed. Quite often he assists Afiki Kumalekano.
- 17 O.T. from biti Juma, ku-Tambala village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 30/10/84.
- 18 See chapter on "The making of the Bimbi and the question of succession" where ku-Tambala's role has been discussed in detail.
- 19 See chapter on "Structure and Power" where shrine organisation has been discussed in detail and where the position of the kachisi wa-milawe has been underlined.
- 20 Curt Sachs, World History p. 78.

- 21 Among the Chewa of Likoma Island and the mainland Mozambique, mashawi is performed as a therapeutic dance for those who are believed to have been possessed by majini (evil spirits).
- 22 O.T. from Grace Mary Useni, Kasenjera village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 9/10/84.
- 23 O.T. from Grace Mary Useni 9/10/84. And O.T. from Kambani White, Maninji village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 14/11/84.
- 24 Curt Sachs, World History p. 85.
- 25 J.M. Schoffeleers, "The Religious Significance", p. 272.
- 26 Curt Sachs, World History p. 87.
- 27 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 22/4/85.
- 28 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 29 Kay Berket-Smith, The Paths of Culture, University of Wisconsin, Madison and Milwaukee, 1965, p. 11.
- 30 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 31 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 22/4/85.
- 32 O.T. from biti Juma 30/10/84 and Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 33 See section on shrine organisation where Bôngwe, the Chewa ancestral spirit, has been discussed.
- 34 J.M. Schoffeleers, "The Religious Significance", p. 276.
- 35 H.L. Vail, "Religion, Language and the Tribal Myth: The Tumbuka and Chewa", in J.M. Schoffeleers, (ed.), Guardians of the Land, Mambo Press, Gwelo, 1979, p. 214.
- 36 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 37 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 38 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 39 See section on "Bimbi: A Personal Portrait".
- 40 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 41 O.T. from Henry Chisinkha 10/8/79.
- 42 Curt Sachs, World History p. 87.

- 43 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 22/4/85.
- 44 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 45 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 46 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 47 I.M. Lewis, Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession, Penguin, Middlesex, 1971, p. 11.
- 48 Benjamin B. Wolman, (ed.), Dictionary of Behavioural Sciences, The MacMillan Press Ltd., London, 1973, p. 340..
- 49 R.W. Firth, in Julius Gould & William L. Kob (eds.), A New Dictionary of Social Science, New York Free Press, Glecoe, 1964, p. 689.
- 50 Elizabeth Colson, "Spirit Possession among the Tonga of Zambia", in John Beattie & John Middleton, (eds.), Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1969, p. 70.
- 51 James Hastings, (ed.), Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. 10, 1918, pp. 124-5.
- 52 Op. cit., p. 125.
- 53 W. Yust, (ed.), Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 18, 1950, p. 302.
- 54 Rymond Firth in M. Beattie & J. Middleton (eds.), Spirit Mediumship p. XI.
- 55 Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi works also as 'ng'anga' (medicine man). He is consulted regularly by many people.
- 56 O.T. from Nandumbo Kasira, Nandumbo village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 11/10/84.
- 57 My informants told me that sometimes consultants come as far away as from Chiradzulo and Mwanza districts which are beyond the confines of the Upper Shire Valley to the south of the region. I was not able to verify this during my field work.
- 58 O.T. from Mwedadi Kananji, Mbonechela village, T.A. Liwonde, Machinga, 7/7/85.
- 59 An extract from a milawe ceremony held on 11/11/84.
- 60 The term spirit (mzimu) is the common word used by Bimbi in all his discourses.

- 61 J.M. Schoffeleers, "Cult idioms and the Dialectics of a Region", in R.P. Werbener, (ed.), Regional Cults, Academic Press, London, 1977, p. 235.
- 62 Op. cit., p. 233.
- 63 O.T. from Yasini Amini Kalembo, Kalembo village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 16/8/83.
- 64 O.T. from Uladi Kumayera, Kumayera village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 18/1/85.
- 65 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 66 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 67 Alexander Hitherwick, "Nyanjas" in James Hastings (ed.), Encyclopaedia of Religion and ethics, Vol. 9, 1917, p. 420.
- 68 J.M. Schoffeleers, "The Chisumphi and Mbona Cults in Malawi: A Comparative History", in J.M. Schoffeleers, (ed.), Guardians of the Land, Mambo Press, Gwelo, 1979, p. 169.
- 69 I.M. Lewis, Ecstatic Religion p. 39.
- 70 Hitherwick, "Nyanjas" p. 420.
- 71 Rymond Firth in J. Beattie and J. Middleton, Spirit Mediumship p. XII.
- 72 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 6/7/85, and Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 73 The New Encyclopaedia Brittanica, Vol. 16, 1974, p. 640.
- 74 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 75 O.T. from Lawrence Mdala, Ligwangwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 14/11/84.
- 76 O.T. from Kambani White 14/11/84.
- 77 J.G. Peristiany, "The Ideal and the actual: the role of prophets in the Pokot political system", in J. Beattie & G. Lienhardt, (eds.), Studies in Social Anthropology: Essays in memory of E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, p. 197.
- 78 Op. cit., pp. 196-7.
- 79 This milawe was held on 11/11/84 for village headmen from chief Liwonde. It was attended by eight village headmen namely Idilisa Ajitu Msungu, Nawanga, Mtundu, Mtavu, Tabu, Chabwela, Mgundiwa and Mpotola, and many other people.

- 80 This milawe was held on 17/11/84 for village headmen from chief Kalembo area. It was attended by thirteen village headmen namely ku-Tambala, Makunganya, Mposa, Magombe, Malidade, Nyangwa, Kumayera, Kasenjera, Ligwangwa, Majikuta, Galanje, Mmaniwa, and Mkanda. A number of other people also attended this possession seance. It was a mixed congregation in terms of faith and ethnicity.
- 81 See appendix C for these ancestral spirits.
- 82 On these ancestral spirits see appendix C.
- 83 A true spirit of milawe can only be appreciated when cast on its social context and on the gravity of weather conditions prevailing at the time. It is like a civil case with people pleading for mercy.
- 84 Lewis, Ecstatic Religion, p. 133.
- 85 Op. cit., p. 137.
- 86 Op. cit., p. 35.
- 87 Op. cit., p. 18.
- 88 John Beattie & John Middleton, (eds.), Spirit Mediumship p. XVIII.

Chapter 5

- 1 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, Bimbi village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 17/11/84.
- 2 O.T. from Petro Mmaniwa, Mmaniwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 15/1/85.
- 3 O.T. from Henry Chisinkha, Chisinkha village, T.A. Msamala, Machinga, 18/8/79.
- 4 O.T. from Lawrence Mdala, Ligwangwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 14/11/84.
- 5 O.T. from Yasini Amini Kalembo, Kalembo village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 16/8/83. The expression 'dead rat' is a figure of speech intended to show that the sex taboo has been broken.
- 6 O.T. from Yasini Amini Kalembo 16/8/83.

- 7 O.T. from Lawrence Mdala 14/11/84.
- 8 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 6/7/84.
- 9 Alexander Hetherwick, "Nyanjas" in Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. 9, 1917, p. 420.
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- 10 See for example section on shrine organisation where those have been discussed.
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- 12 James D. Dunn, in Gordon S. Wakefield, A Dictionary of Christianity, SCM Press, London, 1983, pp. 290-1.
- 13 O.T. from Nandumbo Kasira, Nandumbo village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 17/8/83.
- 14 See chapter on "Structure and Power" where the role of chief Kalembo and village headman Mmaniwa in the Nyangu shrine organisation has been discussed.
- 15 See chapter on "Structure and Power" where Mpango's role in the religious affairs of Kalembo chiefdom has been discussed.
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- 18 O.T. from Merina James, Mmaniwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 29/10/84.
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- 20 Ian Linden, "Chisumphu Theology in the Religion of Central Malawi", in J.M. Schoffeleers, (ed.), Guardians of the Land, Mambo Press, Gwelo, 1979, p. 192.
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- 23 The New Encyclopaedia Britanica, Vol. 1, 1974, p. 251.

- 24 Edwin Smith, "African Symbolism", in The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, Vol. 82, 1952, p. 21.
- 25 O.T. from Anubi Chipande Chekwenda, Kasenjera village, T.A., Kalembo, Machinga, 13/1/85.
- 26 O.T. from biti Chaima Azimanye Wandu, Malidade village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 8/2/85.
- 27 A. Werner, The Natives of British Central Africa, Archibald Constable and Company Ltd., London, 1906, p. 77.
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- 31 Recorded in Chagunda village on 13/2/85.
- 32 O.T. from John Swizan Balamanja, Balamanja village, T.A. Mlumbe, Zomba, 18/9/85.
- 33 O.T. from John Swizan Balamanja 18/9/85.
- 34 Robert L. Farhety, in W. Benton, (ed.), The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 16, 1974, p. 133.
- 35 O.T. from Alisen Chiwere and Daudi Salifu, Msamala village, T.A. Msamala, Machinga, 5/2/85.
- 36 O.T. from James Chisanje, Mpango village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 13/4/85.
- 37 O.T. from Kambani White, Maninji village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 14/11/84.
- 38 O.T. from James Chisanje 13/4/85.
- 39 O.T. from Mpango Wadi Msilo, Mpango village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 10/10/84.
- 40 O.T. from Mkanda Maganga, Mkanda village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 9/1/85.
- 41 O.T. from D.E. Kachingwe, Mmaniwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 22/10/84.
- 42 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 3/4/85.
- 43 O.T. from D.E. Kachingwe 22/10/84.

Chapter 6

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- 9 Henry Rowley, Twenty Years in Central Africa,
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Chapter 7

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- 29 Mfunde is a name meaning an 'offering' and used mainly by the Chewa in Central Malawi. Its equivalent is msunje as used in the Upper Shire Valley.
- 30 O.T. from Changamire Mdala, Changamire village, T.A. Mponda, Mangochi, 15/4/85.
- 31 See chapter on "Structure and Power" where holders of shrines and their clans have been indicated.
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- 36 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 16/8/79.
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- 38 O.T. from Foster Ng'ona Nazinomwe, Nazinomwe village, T.A. Malemia, Zomba, 4/9/79.

- 39 O.T. from village headman Masaula, Masaula village, T.A. Mlunbe, Zomba, 18/9/85
- 40 See genealogy given to me by Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi. This view is disputed by Kudawe a member of the Banda clan. Kudawe claims that the first Bimbi was Chilembwe Mkonga. He was later succeeded by Kamwanawe, Mikombo, Mpambachulu, Njerema, Kamtukule, Chimbalinga, Nkholinkholi, Mtsamila II, and then Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi. 5/3/85.
- 41 See chapter on "Bimbi: A Personal Portrait" where the meaning of this name is discussed.
- 42 See genealogy.
- 43 See for example Ian Linden, "Chisumphi Theology in the Religion of Central Malawi", in J.M. Schoffeleers, (ed.), Guardians of the Land, Mambo Press, Gwelo, 1979, pp. 190-1.
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- 51 O.T. from Joseph Douglas Mmanga, Mmanga village, T.A. Msamala, Machinga, 12/2/85.
- 52 O.T. from Tambala Mwedadi Chitenjele, Chitenjele village, T.A. Malemia, Zomba, 31/8/79.
- 53 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 16/8/79.

- 54 W.H.J. Rangeley, "Two Nyasaland Rain Shrines", p. 48. Although Rangeley's dating of the destruction of the Msinja rain shrine has no other supporting written evidence elsewhere, it appears to me that at present seems to be the most likely. By 1870's the Maseko Ngoni seem to have finally settled in the Dedza region and well within Msinja Shrine under Makewana. Which of the two rain shrines was first destroyed is hard to tell since oral traditions at hand are silent on this.
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- 57 Op. cit., p. 134.
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- 68 J.B. Webster, "From Yao Hill to Mulanje Mountain", p. 11.
- 69 O.T. from Kalonga Nyenje, Nyenje village, T.A. Kawinga, Machinga, 3/8/79.
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- 75 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi, 16/8/79 and Mwedadi Kananji Liwonde, Mbonechela village, T.A. Liwonde, Machinga, 7/7/85.
- 76 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda 6/7/85.
- 77 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 6/7/85 and Mwedadi Kananji Liwonde 7/7/85.
- 78 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 16/8/79.
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- 81 N.H. Bhebe, "The Ndebele and the Mwari before 1893: A Religious conquest of the conquerors by the vanquished", in J.M. Schoffeleers, (ed.), Guardians of the Land, pp. 287-88.
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- 84 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda 22/4/85.
- 85 According to Swaleyi Mkwanda, another reason why Timang'amba Bimbi was called Nkholinkholi was that he himself used to say "I am the son of Nkholinkholi" instead of "Gogo" as a slip of the tongue especially when he had something to drink.
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- 88 O.T. from Kungwalu Yasini 11/11/84.
- 89 Likoma Diocesan Quarterly Paper, No. 21, October, 1908, p. 351.

- 90 H.S. Stannus, "Notes on some Tribes of British Central Africa", in Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, Vol. 40, 1910, p. 307.
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- 93 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 26/7/85.
- 94 O.T. from biti Juma and Chimbaye Juma 30/10/84.
- 95 O.T. from Dunfren Kachire, Mang'amba village, T.A. Liwonde, Machinga, 2/8/79.
- 96 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 16/8/79.
- 97 W.H.J. Rangeley, "Two Nyasaland Rain Shrines", p. 36.
- 98 O.T. from biti Juma 30/10/84.
- 99 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 22/4/85.
- 100 Upper Shire District Book Vol. 1, 1907-1955, p. 55 (The National Archives, Zomba).
- 101 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 22/4/85.
- 102 O.T. from Kudawe Chiwere 20/2/85.
- 103 O.T. from Kudawe Chiwere 20/2/85.
- 104 O.T. from biti Juma and Chimbaye Juma 30/10/84.
- 105 See "The Making of the Bimbi and the question of succession", where this has been discussed.
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- 107 O.T. from Abasi Tambala Lai 29/10/84 and Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka, 15/11/84.
- 108 O.T. from Abasi Tambala Lai..... 29/10/84 and Sumani Sumaili Chiyaka, 15/11/84.
- 109 O.T. from Nandumbo Kasira, Nandumbo village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 11/11/84.

- 110 O.T. from Grace Mary Useni, Kasenjera village,
T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 9/10/84.
- 111 O.T. from Kudawe Chiwere 20/2/85.
- 112 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 22/4/85.
- 113 O.T. from Francisco Dickson, Chagunda village,
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- 118 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 22/4/85
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- 122 O.T. from Abasi Tambala Lai, Biti Juma, Chimbaye
Juma, 30/10/84 and Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi
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- 124 O.T. from Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi 22/4/85.
- 125 O.T. from Mkwanda Maganga, Mkanda village,
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Chapter 8

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- 2 Op. cit., p. 60.

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- 8 O.T. from Kudawe Chiwere 27/2/85.
- 9 O.T. from Kudawe Chiwere 27/2/85.
- 10 I.M. Lewis, Islam in Tropical Africa p. 63.
- 11 Trimingham, The Influence of Islam p. 95.
- 12 Lewis, Islam in Tropical Africa p. 20.
- 13 Trimingham, The Influence of Islam p. 65.
- 14 Op. cit., pp. 81-2.
- 15 Kenneth Cragg, The House of Islam, Dickenson
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- 17 E. van Donzel, B. Lewis, & Ch. Pellat, (eds.),
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See also appendix D.
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- 19 O.T. from James Chisanje, Mpango village, T.A.
Kalembo, Machinga, 14/4/85.
- 20 O.T. from Shaikh Yusufu Maidah, Malirabwana
village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 13/4/85.
- 21 O.T. from James Chisanje 14/4/85.
- 22 O.T. from Kudawe Chiwere 27/2/85.
- 23 O.T. from mwalimu Idilisa Masungu, Mkamwana village,
T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 14/4/85.

- 24 Trimingham, The Influence of Islam p. 25.
- 25 Op. cit., p. 95.
- 26 Laurence Chisui, Kalilole wa wana, The University Mission Press, Likoma, 1950, p. 46.
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- 28 A.E. Anderson-Morshead, The History of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa, Vol. 1, 1859-1909, 1955, p. 235.
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- 37 O.T. from Grace Mary Useni, Kasenjera village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 9/10/84.
- 38 Nyasaland Diocesan Chronicle, October, 1930, p. 12.
- 39 Nyasaland Diocesan Chronicle, July, 1928, p. 24.
- 40 Nyasaland Diocesan Chronicle, January, 1955, No. 176, pp. 23-4.
- 41 Nyasaland Diocesan Chronicle, July, 1928, p. 24.
- 42 Anderson-Morshead, The History of the Universities' Mission, p. 237.
- 43 B. Pachai, "Ngoni Politics and Diplomacy in Malawi: 1848-1904", in B. Pachai, (ed.), The Early History of Malawi, Longman, 1972, p. 198.
- 44 O.T. from Merina James, Mmaniwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 29/10/84.

- 45 Bishop P.A. Kalilombe, W.F., "Doing Theology at the Grassroots", Paper presented at the Second General Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of African Theologians, Nairobi, 1984, pp. 3-4.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

- 1 See for example the book titled, A Handbook of Portuguese Nyasaland, Naval Intelligence Divison, Admiralty, London, M.S.O., 1920, p. 47 and W. Basil Worsfold, Portuguese Nyasaland, Sampson Low Marston & Company, London, 1899, p. 112. Where the Chewa's attitude to work and the crops they have been growing over the years have been described.
- 2 J.M. Schoffeleers, "Cult Idioms and the Dialectic of a Region", in R.P. Werbner, (ed.), Regional Cults, Academic Press, London, 1977, p. 237.

Appendix D

- 1 G. Parrinder, A Dictionary of Non-Christian Religions, Hulton Educational Publications, London, 1975, p. 227.
- 2 O.T. from Shaikh, Twaha Masikini, Mapando village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga, 1/5/85.
- 3 M. Th. Houtsma et al., (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam, Vol. 4, Part I, 1934, p. 247.
- 4 O.T. from Shaikh Twaha Masikini 1/5/85.

SOURCES

This thesis is based, mainly, on oral traditions and oral evidence and memories collected in the field by means of interviews and participant observation. This is a result of the scarcity of written sources on the cult which are scanty and very brief. Research was also conducted in Zomba National Archives, Rhodes House (Oxford) and in the archives of the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in London. Although the results were not encouraging there are indications, from the meagre evidence I collected, that even during the colonial period the Bimbi cult was a force to be reckoned with. The following is the full list of informants whom I interviewed in July-September, 1979; July-September, 1983 and from October 1984 to September, 1985. 150 interviews were collected altogether.

INFORMANTS

- Asimanyewandu, C. (approx. 50), Malidade village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. She is a Chewa of the Phiri clan. Responsible for preparing beer for rain offering at Malidade rain shrine. Assists Yusufu Malidade during offerings for rain. Interviewed on 8/1/85.
- Bakali, A. (approx. 70), Malunga village, T.A. Malemia, Zomba, Machinga. Yao of the Mwale clan. Son of (hereafter S/o) Chengasyowela. Claims some general knowledge of the history of the Yao of the Mbewe clan under chiefs Liwonde and Kawinga. 20/9/79.
- Bakiri, A. (approx. 88), Chikumba village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Kwilasi. Yao of the Phiri clan. Has a limited knowledge of the history of the Yao under Kalembo. 17/8/79.

- Balamanja, J.S. (approx. 60), Balamanja village, T.A. Mlumbe, Zomba. He is Group village headman (hereafter GVH). Chewa of the Mbewe clan. Chief Councillor in Mlumbe chiefdom and Bimbi's representative at chief Mlumbe's court. Owns a rain shrine. Chief organiser of Bimbi agricultural rituals in Mlumbe chiefdom. Reliable informant. 18/9/85.
- Bimbi, S.M. (approx. 67). Bimbi village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Mkwanda. The leader of the Bimbi cult. Chewa of the Phiri clan. Succeeded Mtsamila II in 1959 and is still in office. Has profound historical knowledge of Chewa history and of the Bimbi cult. His information supported by other independent sources. Very reliable informant. 16/8/79.
- Chagunda, F.D. (approx. 58). Chagunda village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. He is Ngoni village headman (hereafter VH) of the Chisale clan. Loyal supporter of the Bimbi cult. Owns a Bimbi rain shrine. Representative of 12 other Ngoni and Yao village headmen in the affairs of Bimbishop. 13/2/85.
- Chamba, S. (approx. 76), Chamba village, T.A. Kawinga, Machinga. He is Sub-Traditional Authority (hereafter S.T.A.). Yao chief of the Milanzi clan. Claims consanguineal relationship with chief Liwonde and Kawinga. Has special knowledge of the history of the Mbewe chiefs and their wars with the Ngoni. 6/8/79.
- Chande, S. (approx. 64), Lumbe village, S.T.A. Chamba, Machinga. S/o Chande, Yao VH of the Mbewe clan. Has limited knowledge of the history of the Yao of the Mbewe clan. 29/8/79.
- Chekwenda, A.C. (approx. 78), Kasenjera village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Mania. Chewa of the Phiri clan. Elder of the Bimbi cult. Traces ancestry to Namanje ancestral spirit. Officiating elder at Namanje rain shrine. 10/10/84.

- Chifupa, R. (approx. 23), Mmaniwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Ngoni of the Gama clan. Claims that he was healed by Bimbi in 1982 after a long illness and after hospital treatment had failed. 23/10/84.
- Chimkango, N.J. (approx. 48). Kuchili village, T.A. Mlumbe, Zomba. Chewa of the Mbewe clan. Assists village headmen Kuchili and Gwaza at Kuchili and Gwaza rain shrines. 18/9/95.
- Chimwala, M. (approx. 82), Chimwala village, S.T.A. Chimwala, Mangochi. S/o Wapele Lunda. Has some knowledge of Yao rituals. He is the father of the present chief Chimwala (Yao). 17/4/85.
- Chimdikiti, C. (approx. 80), Chimdikiti village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Chiyembekezo. Ngoni GVH of the Mbewe clan. Principal Ngoni representative in the affairs of Bimbishop in Kalembo chiefdom. Assists Mmaniwa and Mpango during offerings for rain. 16/1/85.
- Chisanje, J. (approx. 23), Mpango village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Secondary School student. Yao of the Phiri clan. Has followed closely the conflict between chief Kalembo and Bimbi. Reliable informant. 14/4/85.
- Chisinkha, H. (approx. 72), Chisinkha village, T.A. Msamala, Machinga. S/o Chosani. Chewa VH of the Lwambano clan. Has limited knowledge of Chewa history and of Chewa agricultural rituals. Reliable informant. 18/8/79.
- Chitenjele, T.M. (approx. 74), Chitenjele village, T.A. Malemia, Zomba. S/o Mwamadi. Yao VH of the Milanzi clan. Claims special knowledge of Yao history of the Mbewe and their wars with the Ngoni. Has wide knowledge of the affairs of Bimbishop. Alleges that Mtsamila I was killed by the Ngoni. 31/8/79.

- Chiunda, M. (approx. 62), Makunganya village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Patawile. Yao VH of the Milanzi clan. 8/1/85
- Chiwaya, C. (approx. 63), Chiwaya village, T.A. Kawinga, Machinga. Lomwe VH of the Nkhoma clan. Claims some knowledge of the history of the Lomwe from Mozambique into Machinga district in 1900's. Reliable on Lomwe history. 31/8/79.
- Chiwere, A. (approx. 67), Msamala village, T.A. Msamala, Machinga. Yao of the Phiri clan. Has in-depth knowledge of the history of Msamala chiefs and their relationship with the Bimbis. Reliable informant. 5/2/85.
- Chiwere, K. (approx. 81), Kudawe village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Chiwere. Chewa of the Banda clan. Claims special knowledge of the history of the Chewa and of the Bimbi cult in particular. Argues that the Bimbiship was Banda in origin but that later it was usurped by the members of the Phiri clan. Reliable informant. 18/8/79.
- Chiyaka, S.S. (approx. 77), Chiyaka village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Meleamu. Chewa VH of the Phiri clan. Has considerable knowledge of the history of the earlier Bimbis. 15/11/84.
- Daudi, A. (approx. 76), Dumo village, T.A. Malemia, Machinga. S/o bin Daudi. Yao of the Zimbiri clan. Claims special knowledge of Yao history of the Mwale clan under chief Malemia. 28/8/79.
- Disi, Y. (approx. 82), Machinjiri village, T.A. Malemia, Zomba. Yao S.T.A. of the Phiri clan. Claims profound knowledge of the history of Malemia chiefs. Senior chief councillor in Malemia chiefdom. 30/8/79.

- Frederick, A. (approx. 68), Old Bimbi village, T.A. Kuntumanji, Zomba. Chewa GVH of the Mwale clan. Claims detailed knowledge of the history of the Chewa of Zomba district. 17/5/85.
- Gonji, M. (approx. 65), Malidade village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao of the Mnumbwano clan. 1/5/85.
- Hatimu, K. (approx. 76), Mkamwana village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao Sheikh of the Qadiriya brotherhood. Limited knowledge of the history of Islam. 14/4/85.
- Hinda-Hinda (approx. 75), Hinda-Hinda village, T.A. Kalembo village, Machinga. Ngoni GVH of the Duwe clan. S/o Hinda-Hinda. Claims that his father was a slaver. Has good knowledge of Ngoni history under Gomani. 12/2/85.
- Hoba, A.T. (approx. 62), Hoba village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Ngoni VH of the Namilanzi clan. Participates in Bimbi rituals like any other Ngoni VH. 16/1/85.
- James, M. (approx. 68), Mmaniwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Daughter of (hereafter D/o) Munyese. Chewa of the Phiri clan. Acted as VH Mmaniwa for four years. Responsible for making beer offering for rain at Nyangu rain shrine. Reliable informant. 23/1/85.
- Juma, C. (approx. 70), ku-Tambala village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Rightful heir to ku-Tambalaship. Chewa of the Mbewe clan. Guardian and officiating elder at Chirangwe rain shrine. 30/10/84.
- Juma abiti (approx. 76), ku-Tambala village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Chewa of the Mbewe clan. Priestess at Chirangwe rain shrine. Claims to have seen Timang'amba Bimbi and Mtsamila II. Very reliable informant. 30/10/84.

- Kabiyo, C.S. (approx. 49), Kabiyo village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Ngoni VH of the Mlauzi clan. Participates in Bimbi rituals. 16/1/85.
- Kachingwe, D.E. (approx. 38), Mmaniwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao of the Mbewe clan. Has personal experience of a man called Justice who was accused of stopping the rain in 1965 and was punished for it. 22/10/84.
- Kachire, M.Y.D. (approx. 83), Mang'amba village, T.A. Liwonde, Machinga. Ngoni of the Ngozo clan. S/o Richard. Claims special knowledge of the history of the Ngoni of chief Gomani. Claims also first hand knowledge of the events that led to the Chilembwe uprising of 1915. 2/8/79.
- Kalembo, Y.A. (approx. 50), Kalembo village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao paramount chief of the Phiri clan. S/o Amini. Has overall jurisdiction over Bimbi but subordinate to him in major agricultural rituals. Has detailed knowledge of the history of the Msamala kindred. 21/8/79.
- Kaliati, S. (approx. 56), Mponda village, T.A. Liwonde, Machinga. S/o Lawrence. Lomwe of the Zimbiri clan. Claims special knowledge of Lomwe initiation rituals and offerings for rain. 2/8/79.
- Kalilombe, K. (approx. 70), Mmanga village, T.A. Msamala, Machinga. S/o Kalilombe. Chewa of the Phiri clan. He was often accused of stopping the rain in Mmanga village and punished for it. Claims some knowledge of the history of the Chewa from Kaphirintiwa. 11/8/79.
- Kapoto, S. (approx. 78), Chikumba village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Kapoto. Yao of the Mbewe clan. Has limited knowledge of the history of the Mbewe clan. 17/8/79.

- Kasese, P. (approx. 70), Mkanda village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Chewa of the Gama clan. Claims some knowledge of the history of the earlier Bimbis. 13/1/85.
- Kasira, N. (approx. 70), Nandumbo village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Lisecheni. Yao GVH of the Mbewe clan. Leading councillor at chief Kalembo's court. Has political jurisdiction over Bimbi but subordinate to him in religious matters. Has good knowledge of the affairs of Bimbiship. 18/8/79.
- Khuzumba (approx. 58), Khuzumba village, T.A. Malemia, Zomba. S/o Mtemanyama. Chewa VH of the Mwale clan. Claims detailed knowledge of the history of the Chewa of Zomba district. 16/9/79.
- Komakoma, M. (approx. 42), Mgundaphiri village, T.A. Mponda, Mangochi. Chewa of the Namilazi clan. 15/4/85.
- Kumitawa, S. (approx. 51), Kumitawa village, T.A. Mlumbe, Zomba. Owns a rain shrine. Chewa VH of the Phiri clan. 18/9/85.
- Kamwana (approx. 78), Kamwana village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao VH. Has some knowledge of Yao rituals. 23/10/84.
- Kumalekano, A. (approx. 56), Old Bimbi village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi's nephew. Chewa of the Phiri clan. Bimbi's interpreter at milawe ceremonies, organiser of chilewe ritual dance and officiating elder at Bimbi rain shrine in the Mponda Forest. 11/10/84.
- Kumtumanji, G. (approx. 71), Kumtumanji village, T.A. Kumtumanji, Zomba. Yao paramount chief of the Mwale clan. S/o Jameson. 12/9/79

- Liwonde, M.K. (approx. 87), Mbonechela village, T.A. Liwonde, Machinga. Yao paramount chief of the Mbewe clan. Came to power in 1954. One of the most distinguished Yao chiefs. Claims consanguineal relationship with chief Kawinga. Also claims special relationship with Bimbi to whom he offers some political support in times of dispute between chief Kalembo and Bimbi. The most authoritative historian of the Mbewe chiefdoms. 31/7/79.
- London, A. (approx. 51), Mmaniwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Ngoni of the Gama clan. Councillor of Mmaniwa village headman. Shrine keeper of the Nyangu rain shrine in the Ulongwe forest. 30/10/84.
- Lundu, J. (approx. 55), Linjidzi village, T.A. Lundu, Blantyre. Yao paramount chief. Owns a Bimbi rain shrine. Critic of the Church's teaching about ancestral spirits. Has detailed knowledge of the history of the Lundu chieftaincy. 18/9/85.
- Maidah, Y. (approx. 78), Malirabwana village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Sheikh of the Sukuti brotherhood. Yao of the Phiri clan. Great critic of the Qadiriya brotherhood. Has detailed knowledge of the beginnings of Islam in the Upper Shire Valley. Participated in the contest for rain-calling against Bimbi in 1982. 13/4/85.
- Mainga, T. (approx. 75), Mponda village, T.A. Mponda, Mangochi. Yao of the Milazi clan. Claims some knowledge of the history of the Yao under chief Mponda. 16/4/85.
- Makalani, P. (approx. 86), Chipeta village, T.A. Mponda, Mangochi. Yao of the Phiri clan. Has some knowledge of the earlier history of the relationship between the Bimbi and Mponda chiefs. 19/8/83.
- Makaula, P. (approx. 69), Ndenda village, T.A. Liwonde, Machinga. Lomwe of the Nkhoma clan. Claims special knowledge of the Lomwe history from Mozambique in 1912. 1/8/79.

- Makwinja, W.S. (approx. 67), Makwinja village, S.T.A. Chowe, Mangochi. S/o Anyambuzichilopa. Yao VH of the Milazi clan. Claims some knowledge of the history of the Yao of the Milazi clan under Makanjila. 17/4/85.
- Malemia, A. (approx. 68), Malemia village, T.A. Malemia, Zomba. Yao paramount chief of the Mwale clan. Has no relationship with Bimbi. Claims special knowledge of the history of the Yao of the Mwale clan under Malemia and Kuntumanji. 1/9/79.
- Malidade, Y. (approx. 64), Malidade village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Owns a Bimbi rain shrine. Chewa VH of the Phiri clan. Officiating elder at Kaweya rain shrine. Some good knowledge of Chewa rituals. 8/1/85.
- Maninji, J.M. (approx. 63), Maninji village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Chewa VH of the Phiri clan. S/o abiti Mwalimu. Senior Bimbi cult elder. Spirit wife provider. Owns a Bimbi rain shrine. 9/1/85.
- Manjaule, A. (approx. 66), Kapapa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Manjaule. Chewa of the Phiri clan. Claims some relationship with Bimbi lineage. Is well versed in the history of Bimbiship. Reliable informant. 9/10/84.
- Mang'amba, M. (approx. 83), Mang'amba village, T.A. Liwonde, Machinga. Yao GVH of the Phiri clan. Claims some relationship with chiefs Malemia and Kuntumanji. Has detailed knowledge of the history of the Yao of the Mwale clan. S/o Mphezeni.
- Masano, J. (approx. 58), Namalomba parish, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. An Anglican priest. Spoke on the strength of the Anglican Church at Namalomba. 17/8/83.

- Masaula, (approx. 54), Masaula village, T.A. Mlumbe, Zomba. Chewa of the Phiri clan. Owns a Bimbi rain shrine. Claims detailed knowledge of Chewa rituals and the earlier history of Bimbiship. 18/9/85.
- Masikini, T. (approx. 79), Mapando village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Sheikh of the Sukuti brotherhood. Participated in the 1982 contest of rain-calling at Kalembo against Bimbi. Has good knowledge of the earlier history of Islam. A great critic of Qadiriya brotherhood. 1/5/85.
- Masungu, I.M. (approx. 68), Mkamwana village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao of the Zimbiri clan. Mwalimu (teacher) of the Qadiriya brotherhood. Strong supporter of Bimbi cult. Critic of all Bimbi opponents. 14/4/85.
- Mayera, U. (approx. 39), Mayera village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao VH of the Mbewe clan. Has good knowledge of the mechanics of how the chiefs and the village headmen approach Bimbi for milawe. 18/1/85.
- Mbungo (approx. 62), Mdenga village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao of the Milanzi clan. S/o Gulu. Officiating elder at the Bimbi rain shrine in Mdenga village. Has good knowledge of the Yao history under chief Kalembo. 27/2/85.
- Mdala, C. (approx. 76), Changamire village, T.A. Mponda, Mangochi. Chewa VH of the Phiri clan. Claims consanguineal relationship with Bimbi lineage. Senior member of the Phiri clan. Owns a rain shrine and he is the officiating elder at the shrine. Has very good knowledge of the early history of Chewa from Kaphirintiwa. 15/4/85.
- Mdala, L. (approx. 49), Ligwangwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Bimbi cult elder. Chewa of the Mbewe clan. S/o Abina abiti Namwera. Says Pepaa (pardon) during milawe ceremonies. 14/11/84.

- Mgobola, T. (approx. 80), Hinda-Hinda village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. 13/2/85.
- Milambe, A. (approx. 39), Milambe village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Ngoni VH of the Phiri clan. Knows some Ngoni history. 13/2/85.
- Mkalaile, N. (approx. 72), Mkalaile village, S.T.A. Sitola, Machinga. Yao VH of the Mbewe clan. Has some good knowledge of the history of Liwonde chiefs and their relationship with Bimbi. 27/7/79.
- Mkambula, S. (approx. 79), Masaliwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao VH of the Phiri clan. S/o Tambuli. Has good knowledge of the history of the Yao of the Phiri clan under Kalembo. 20/8/79.
- Mkamwana (approx. 56), Mkamwana village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao VH of the Phiri clan. Follower of the Qadiriya brotherhood and supporter of the Bimbi cult. Critic of Sukuti Sheikhs and their anti-Bimbi activities. 14/4/85.
- Mkanda, M (approx. 63), Mkanda village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Chewa VH of the Simango clan. S/o Victoria. Important headman in the affairs of Bimbiship. Assists Mmaniwa during offerings for rain at the Nyangu rain shrine in the Ulongwe forest. Was recently reprimanded by the Catholic Church for his involvement in Bimbi rituals since he is a Catholic himself. 9/1/85.
- Mkondiwa, J. (approx. 58), Chamba village. S.T.A. Chamba, Machinga. Yao of the Milazi clan. 6/8/79.
- Mmanga, J.D. (approx. 54) Mmanga village, T.A. Msamala, Machinga. Chewa VH of the Phiri clan. S/o Mmanga. Owns a Bimbi rain shrine and he is the officiating elder at the shrine. 25/8/79.

- Mmaniwa, J.P. (approx. 42), Mmaniwa village. T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Chewa VH of the Phiri clan. S/o Merina James. Guardian of the Nyangu rain shrine in the Ulongwe Forest. Officiating elder at the shrine. Bimbi's representative at chief Kalembo's court. 15/1/85.
- Mnyaka, M.B. (approx. 35), Mnyaka village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Ngoni VH of the Gama clan. S/o Bacha. Participates actively in Bimbi agricultural rituals. 16/1/85.
- Mpango, W.M. (approx. 72), Mpango village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao GVH of the Phiri clan. S/o Mpango. Chief adviser to chief Kalembo in matters of Bimbiship, and principal organiser of all agricultural rituals at every agricultural season as demanded by the people and advised by Bimbi. Assists VH Mmaniwa during offerings for rain at Nyangu rain shrine on behalf of chief Kalembo. Claims consanguineal relationship with chief Kalembo. Has good knowledge of the earlier history of the Yao under Kalembo. 10/10/84.
- Mpheta, C.K. (approx. 77), Mpheta village, T.A. Kawinga, Machinga. Chewa GVH of the Chisale clan. S/o Njoloma. Claims detailed knowledge of the history of the Chewa of the Chisale clan. Bimbi official and ritual figure for the people living on the Domasi Valley, Zomba. 8/9/79.
- Mpinganjira, S.M. (approx. 47), Mpinganjira village, T.A. Mponda, Mangochi. Chewa GVH of the Phiri clan. Claims descent from Makewana the ritual figure at the Chewa rain shrine at Msinja. Owns a Bimbi rain shrine. He is the officiating elder at the shrine. Represents Bimbi interests at chief Mponda's court. 15/4/85.

- Mposa, B.S. (approx. 39), Ligwangwa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Chewa of the Phiri clan. Bimbi cult elder. Assists ku-Tambala in his duties of introducing suppliants to Bimbi for milawe. 14/11/84.
- Msakula, A. (approx. 49), Malidade village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Chewa of the Phiri clan. Assists biti Chaima Asimanyewandu preparing beer offering for rain. 8/1/85.
- Msungu, I.A. (approx. 58), Saidi Msungu village, T.A. Liwonde, Machinga. A very important Chewa VH of the Phiri clan. Bimbi cult elder and guardian of the Bimbi rain shrine in the Ponda Forest. He has his own Bimbi rain shrine. Go-between chief Liwonde and Bimbi. Bimbi's representative at Liwonde's court. 8/7/85.
- Mtavu (approx. 56), Mtavu village, T.A. Mponda, Mangochi. Chewa VH of the Phiri clan. Has some knowledge of Chewa rituals. 16/4/85.
- Mtenga, W. (approx. 81), Mtenga village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Changa. Yao VH of the Phiri clan. Once accused of stopping the rain and punished by the people for it. Has limited knowledge of the earlier history of the Yao of the Phiri clan under Kalembo. 19/8/79.
- Mwalabu, U.T. (approx. 65), Mwalabu village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao VH of the Phiri clan. S/o Twaibu. Sheikh of the Sukuti brotherhood and Chairman of the Muslim Association in Malawi. Chief protagonist of Bimbi agricultural rituals. Head of the Namanolo Koranic school. Has good knowledge of the earlier history of Islam in the Upper Shire Valley. 4/5/85.

- Mwalero, S. (approx. 68), Mwalero village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao VH of the Phiri clan. Responsible for rebuilding of the Nyangu rain shrine in the Ulongwe Forest. S/o Mariana. Claims that his family has always been responsible to maintain the physical fabric of the rain shrine in the Ulongwe Forest which is under the protection of chief Kalembo himself. 16/1/85.
- Mzume, A. (approx. 80), Gopole village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Chewa VH of the Mwale clan. Has good knowledge of ritual offerings of the Chewa for rain and other things. 18/8/79.
- Nagama, A. (approx. 58), Milambe village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Ngoni of the Gama clan. Has some knowledge of the history of the Ngoni under Gomani. 13/2/85.
- Nakamu, S.T. (approx. 33), Chisawa village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Modern mwalimu (Muslim teacher) of the Sukuti brotherhood. Yao of the Phiri clan. Runs a Koranic school of approximately 60 children. 1/5/85.
- Namasalima, A.U. (approx. 66), Namasalima village, T.A. Kuntumanji, Zomba. Chewa VH of the Mwale clan. S/o Uladi. Has good knowledge of the Chewa of the Zomba district. 6/9/79.
- Mazinomwe, F.N. (approx. 62), Nazinomwe village, T.A. Malemia, Zomba. Chewa VH of the Mwale clan. S/o Ng'ona. Has good knowledge of Chewa history in Zomba district. 4/9/79.
- Ndeleman, M. (approx. 68), Chindamba village, S.T.A. Chowe, Mangochi. Yao of the Mbewe clan. Claims to have been possessed several times to foretell about rain in Malindi area. No longer does so now. 17/4/85.
- Nedi, J. (approx. 55), Kamwana village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao of the Phiri clan. Claims to have witnessed Swaleyi Mkwanda Bimbi's ritual of climbing the njale tree in 1959. 22/10/84.

Nyama, A. (approx. 76), Nyama village, T.A. Liwonde, Machinga. S/o Alidi. Yao of the Phiri clan. A leading councillor at chief Liwonde's court at Mbonechela. Has very good knowledge of Bimbi history and the rituals of succession to Bimbishop. His information was verified by other independent informants. Very reliable informant. 9/8/79.

Nyani, R.G.C. (approx. 59), Nyama village, T.A. Malemia, Zomba. S/o Grahame. Chewa VH of the Mwale clan. Surviving member of the Nyani chieftaincy which flourished in Zomba district prior to the coming of the Yao under chief Malemia whom they gave refuge. Claims common ancestress with Bimbi. Has very good knowledge of the history of the Chewa of the Zomba district. 3/9/79.

Nyenje, K. (approx. 70), Nyenje village, T.A. Kawinga, Machinga. Yao VH of the Mbewe clan. Claims consanguineal relationship with Liwonde and Kawinga. Has good knowledge of the history of the Yao of the Mbewe clan, their migrations, wars and conquests, and war rituals. 3/8/79.

Patel, M. (approx. 75), Kwisongole village, T.A. Malemia, Zomba. S/o Maulidi. Claims some relationship with Malemia and Kuntumanji. Has some knowledge of the history of the Yao of the Mwale clan under Malemia. 27/8/79.

Petro, D. (approx. 48), Mbonechela village, T.A. Liwonde, Machinga. Yao of the Milaze clan. Chief Liwonde's shrine keeper. Has good historical knowledge of the relationship between Liwonde chiefs and the Bimbis. Assists chief Liwonde during rain-calling ceremonies. 1/8/79.

- Salifu, D. (approx. 59), Msamala village, T.A. Msamala, Machinga. Yao VH of the Gama clan. Caretaker of the Msamala chieftdom as a result of the chief's death in November, 1984. Has good knowledge of the earlier history of the relationship between Msamala chiefs and the Bimbis. 5/2/85.
- Samson, K. (approx. 57), Mkamwana village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Yao of the Phiri clan. 14/4/85.
- Sitola, K. (approx. 58), Sitola village, S.T.A. Sitola, Machinga. Yao S.T.A. of the Mbewe clan and heir to the Liwonde chieftaincy. Has good knowledge of the history of the Yao under Kawinga and Liwonde and the formation of their chieftdoms in the Upper Shire Valley. 9/8/79.
- Suwedi, M. (approx. 78), Mlenga village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Suwedi. Chewa of the Milazi clan. Has good knowledge of the history of the Yao under Kawinga, their conquests and formation of their chieftdoms. 22/8/79.
- Tambala, A.L. (approx. 62), ku-Tambala village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Very important Chewa VH of the Milazi clan. Bimbi cult elder and his house involved in the processes of succession to Bimbiship. Leads people to milawe. S/o Chembotele. Succeeded his father to ku-Tambalaship because of lack of competent heirs to the headmanship. Very reliable informant. 29/10/84.
- Useni, G.M. (approx. 58), Kasenjera village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Chewa of the Phiri clan. She claims some relationship with Bimbi lineage. She saw Bimbi Mtsamila II and her domestic position in her family. Has very good knowledge of the activities of the Bimbis. Responsible (indirectly) for preparations for beer offering for rain at Namanje rain shrine under the guardianship of Anubi Chipande Chekwenda. 9/10/84.

- Whisky, E. (approx. 52), Chesi village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. Has some knowledge of Yao people who were accused of stopping the rain one of whom was Mtenga VH. 15/11/84.
- White, K. (approx. 43), Maninji village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Ulasya biti John. Chewa of the Phiri clan. Swaleyi Mkwanda's nephew. Cult elder assisting Kumalekano organising chilewe ritual dance and milawe as an interpreter. 14/11/84.
- Yasini, J. (approx. 60), Kalembo village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Yasini. Yao Sheikh of the Phiri clan and staunch member of the Sukuti brotherhood. Personal chaplain of chief Kalembo (his uncle). A leading critic against agricultural rituals prescribed by Bimbi. Great critic of Qadiriya brotherhood. 29/10/84.
- Yasini, K. (approx. 70), Mmanga village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga. S/o Kuchikapa and che Patel. Yao of the Phiri clan. Ex-Kalembo chief ousted from power sometime in 1960's. Has good knowledge of Yao rituals at ku-Yao. Has also good knowledge of the earlier history of the Bimbis and the taboos they observe. Reliable informant. 11/10/84.

It may be of interest to note that good informants were interviewed several times and their information checked and compared with other independent informants. Much time was spent with the cult leader himself with whom I had more than ten interviews lasting several hours. Wherever possible I participated in the rituals themselves in order to obtain a clear picture of what actually goes on in the activities of the cult. This was the case with milawe rituals and offerings for rain. The date recorded against each informant indicates the first time when the first interview with him/her was recorded.

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